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Ch 1: Happiness that's sure to last forever // The Tea Set

[image]

It was a Saturday afternoon when America's doorbell rang. America had been working on extra papers about the wall for the last few minutes when he heard it ring. America hadn't been expecting anyone, and he didn't have anyone from his government coming over to debrief him on something. He wasn't expecting another country either, especially since countries live in their capital cities. The countryhuman's meeting at UN's New York headquarters wasn't supposed to happen for another month, too. Confused, the American country went to his door and opened it. Behind the door stood a smiling, maple-leaf man. This maple-leaf man, obviously, is the glorious Canada himself. Behind Canada stood their dad, Britain.

"Surprise!" Canada exclaimed with a smile, holding his arms out for a hug. "We thought we'd surprise you before the meeting!"

America, startled and very confused, stood there for a second until he finally processed what had happened. When he realized what was going on, he felt a swell of happiness and hugged his brother, "I appreciate you coming here just to surprise me, but why are you all the way out here? There's no reason to, especially with the meeting maybe a little more than a month away."

Canada gave America a questioning look, "You don't know?"

"Know what?"

Canada chuckled to himself, "You'll figure it out tomorrow." America rolled his eyes at that. Of course, he should've known his brother wouldn't tell him anything. It didn't matter, really. If it was something important, he would be told by his government sooner rather than later.

Britain was the first to go inside after he greeted his son, of course. Britain sat in one of America's chairs and only then did America notice that his dad was holding a tea set box... thing. America didn't know the name for it. Britain went to the nearest table and opened the box. America's eyes widened when he saw what was inside.

Britain chuckled at America's reaction, "Yes, it's about time I used this tea set instead of being afraid it'll break again." Britain laughed again at an old memory America himself was remembering. What was inside the box was an exact replica of a tea set that Britain had when America was a child. When America rebelled against his father, he had broken that tea set and thrown Britain's tea away in a fit of- admittedly childish- rage. But when WWII ended, America made some of his best craftsmen make an exact replica that he later gave to Britain, as thanks, and as an apology.

America smiled as he reminisced and sat down with Britain and Canada. They talked and drank tea Britain decided to make. They practically talked the whole day away, laughing and teasing, arguing and convincing. When the two finally left to find a hotel in D.C. for the night, America went back to his work, now with a happy smile on his face. Though them just coming over and talking with him seemed like a small gesture, it meant a lot to America, especially since they live hundreds of miles away.

America loves these small moments, loves the moments where he could talk and smile and waste the whole day away with people he holds dear.

Little did America know, that was the last time he would feel so happy.

Hello, smol beans!

This is my very first fanfic so sorry if my pacing and upload schedule is awful ;~;

For reference in later chapters,

~~-~~ means a happy memory,

--~-- means a sad memory, and

---x--- means time skip.

Also, I was looking for happy songs in my youtube playlist and realized I didn't have any so uhhhh I just put a cover of hey brother in cuz Canada's here

I'm great at decisions.

Tschüss!

-Selva

Ch 2: Old Memories and Lost Tears // The Iris

[image] [image]

America tapped his foot impatiently. Japan and South Korea were supposed to meet him at his house over thirty minutes ago. They had planned a day of fun and video games weeks in advance. It all kind of worked out because they were over here early for that UN meeting in a month. Anyway, this meetup was the only thing America had going for him on that specific day and man, was he bored. After what felt like an hour of waiting, Japan rang the doorbell, carrying South Korea over her shoulder. America smiled and let the two in, looking at South Korea with amusement. The poor Korean country looked tired and flustered at the same time.

"Hey Japan," America said, deciding to ignore the fact they were late, it was probably just a flight problem. He looked at South Korea, snorted because of how ridiculously flustered he looked and added, "Hi, South Korea."

"こんにちは **(Hi)**, America!" Japan hugged America. "Sorry we were late, our flight got delayed because North Korea decided he'd stay behind that minute." With that, she casually dropped the Korean country on the floor. He let out a loud yelp and jumped to his feet, yelling, "What did you do that for?!" He couldn't stay mad for long, however, because Japan was already heading towards the living room so that they all could commence the gaming session. America couldn't help but laugh at South Korea's anger and followed Japan. After cooling down a bit, South Korea joined them.

After playing a variety of games on a variety of consoles, Japan got bored and left the room. After a few minutes, she came back inside with a movie she had brought. The movie Japan had brought was some sort of romance movie about some random kid on Mars whose name America didn't know. The reason America didn't know was because he dozed off within the first few minutes of the movie.

When America finally woke up, it was near the end of the movie. America, who was startled when he woke up, looked around to find Japan on the edge of her seat, watching the movie intently. America could tell that she would probably use this movie as inspiration for more of her cringy fanfics. South Korea, meanwhile, wasn't even looking at the screen. He was, instead, looking at Japan's face with a small smile. America smirked and noted to himself that he should ask Southie about this crush of his later.

When the movie was finally over, Japan was internally squealing. America was used to this by now, though. Japan fangirled at every romance she even slightly shipped, even movie characters who had no relation to her whatsoever. America had heard that she shipped countries too and couldn't help wondering who Japan shipped him with. Either way, Japan, with a bright smile, dragged South Korea to the door. America followed them. They said their goodbyes and parted ways, with Japan talking nonstop to South Korea about all of the shipping inspiration the movie gave her. America waved them goodbye and closed his front door while the other countries walked to their rental car and drove away.

Now, America was alone with his thoughts. He looked at the clock. It was 11:36. America walking into the kitchen, chugged a cup of water and filled up the cup with water again. The tired country went upstairs to his room with the cup and found what he was looking for, it was a flower. A special flower, one that his mom gave him a long time ago.

~~-~~

It was 1783.

America had just defeated his father in the Revolutionary war. America knew his father just wanted the best for him, but he wanted to be in charge of himself and his people, he wanted to be free- something his father never let him be out of fear he would get hurt. France, America's adoptive mother, looked at him with pride and love. America smiled at France and turned to the horizon, where Britain's ship was bobbing away in defeat. America's pride and sense of accomplishment faded away as he started to think about what might happen to him now that he's independent. With uncertainty pricking at his mind, he looked at his

mom and asked, "Mom? What if I'm not able to govern myself? What if I'm not strong enough?"

France turned to the small country and smiled, "Mon fils ***(My son)*** *, you just defeated your père* ***(father)*** *, you are strong enough." America still looked uncertain so his mother sighed and grabbed something from one of her senior officers- it was a small, purple flower in a pot, "Here, mon fils. This is an iris, a flower I hold dear. Think of your nation as this flower. You must water it, give it sunlight, and if you do, it will grow and prosper. If you can correctly take care of this flower, you can govern and lead a nation. Trust me."*

France smiled at her son and kissed him on the forehead. He smiled back and said, "Thanks, mom. I promise that I'll take care of this flower forever."

~~-~~

America smiled at the memory. Of course, this iris wasn't the same iris that France gave him all those years ago, but America made sure that he always got a new iris when the old one died, as some sort of homage to the memory. When America was done watering the iris, he turned off the lights, put his sunglasses on the nightstand, and went to bed.

--~--

America heard a loud "Boom" and opened his eyes. He smelled a faint, metallic smell and... another scent that kind of smelled like rotten eggs. He was no longer in his room but in some sort of underground strategy room. His father was before him, wearing a military uniform reminiscent of World War I. Britain was talking determinedly about trenches, casualties, and land gains. America was confused, why was he here? Another loud boom sounded and the ceiling above shook. It looked like the ceiling was gonna fall on top of them. America's mind raced, 'Why am I here? It's 2019, not 1917, dammit!' His thoughts were disrupted by Britain yelling at him, "Son, pay attention! You need to focus on the plan, not your thoughts! It's our lives on the line here!" America looked at Britain, a confused look on his face. "Bloody 'ell," Britain mumbled to himself. Britain was going to explain the plan again to America when a French officer ran in. "Sirs, the higher-ups have ordered a retreat,

German forces are breaking into our trenches. As a precaution, we need to take you two out of here!" Britain frowned, grabbed his son's arm, and started running after the french soldier, dragging his son along with him. They raced towards a military-owned transportation car, but before they got inside America turned to the battlefield, only to see a sight he wished he would never see again.

What looked like hundreds, maybe thousands, of bodies were scattered across the stretch of land known as No Man's Land. America could see some German soldiers running across the stretch of land, still alive and breathing; but, most of the people out on that terrifying stretch of land were dead, long forgotten fragments of times probably long gone. America's eyes widened when he realized he could recognize some of them as American troops. He could even name some of them. America felt tears on his cheeks as he named everyone he could recognize inside his head- Kevin, Lance, so many people... He saw people he could remember laughing with, people he remembered eating with, and people he considered friends crumpled on the mud, dead. As America was being shoved into the car, he put his hands on his head, wishing he could drown away the emotions, drown away these stupid memories like he had been doing for so long-

--~--

America woke up in a cold sweat. He was gasping for air, struggling to breathe. The American had long forgotten those days, and for good reason. He closed his eyes and curled into a ball and repeatedly whispered to himself, "I'm sorry I couldn't save you all, I'm sorry I couldn't save you all," America felt tears flowing down his cheeks and started to say sorry to every person he recognized from the dream. No, from the memory. After a while, America somehow cried himself back to sleep.

When America woke up, he felt an overwhelming sadness; but this time, he didn't cry. This time, America stood up and grabbed his glasses; however, he didn't put them on. Instead, he went into his bathroom and looked at himself in the mirror. His eyes, that were scarred from pearl (something America is very self-conscious of), were red and puffy. It was obvious that he had been crying. America sighed, put his sunglasses on, and was about to go downstairs for breakfast until he noticed something on his hand.

On his hand, there was a small, black crack.

Hello again.

I edited this way too much hhhhhh

So ye.

I shouldn't be putting this much effort into editing but I'm a paranoid bean and I need help.

Anywho, Meri is in some deep trouble now.

And no, Rus will not show up in the next chapter, sorry my dudes. We'll get 'em next time.

Tschüss!

-Selva

Ch 3: Cracking Smiles // The Gloves

[image]

On his hand, there was a small, black crack.

...

America blinked, but the crack didn't disappear. It was like a nightmare, except America had a sinking feeling that this was reality. America knew he should tell someone, anyone; but, he knew what this was- after all, it had happened to him before. But... this time it felt different somehow. Something didn't feel... right about all of this. This all felt like some sort of twisted joke, like- haha! It's me *again!* America suddenly felt paranoid and insecure- he hadn't felt like this in a long time and that very fact scared him. He knew deep down that he needed help but something told him not to. In the end, America decided to hide it for now, and go to a doctor on Saturday. For your information, Today is Monday, a day filled with endless work.

America started thinking about how he could hide this black crack. After searching for what seemed like an hour, America finally yelled to himself, "Screw it! I'm gonna wear Dad's stupid gloves!"

Dad's "stupid gloves" were white gloves Britain had gifted America a long time ago. In fact, America couldn't remember when Britain had given him these gloves. As far as America knew, he had never worn these gloves before; however, America put on the gloves with ease... **Almost as if he had put on these gloves millions of times before...** A sudden memory flashed before America, but before he could focus on it, it slipped from his grasp. America was left confused and uneasy. America sighed, lightly slapped himself on his cheeks and said, "No time for memories now, America. I got to get to work, I'm already late."

America quickly hustled himself over to the capitol building in D.C.

It was some pretty basic stuff, watching Congress do their thing, saying a few things here and there, and just like that, the day was over. Before America left, however, America heard a soft voice behind him.

"Excuse me, sir," A woman, probably some sort of new secretary, tapped America on the shoulder.

America turned around and smiled, "Heya! What is it, miss?"

She sheepishly looked at the country, "You have a series of meetings in UN's Headquarters in New York from Wednesday of this week to the end of next week."

America was confused, what did she just say? America suddenly asked, "What do you mean, series of meetings? They were supposed to happen next month, not this month!" America didn't know why, but he was becoming uncharacteristically frustrated. When America turned to the poor woman, he noticed that she looked very startled. America paused and suddenly felt guilty, he doesn't usually act like this... "Oh, I'm so sorry miss... I don't know what's gotten into me."

She hesitantly smiled and continued, "You're forgiven... The meeting was moved because Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus had some complications and wouldn't have been able to attend next month, so UN decided to simply move the dates. You'll be taking the plane over to New York tomorrow so that you have at least a half-day of rest before the meeting." America nodded, thanked her, and waved her goodbye, feeling really guilty for his sudden outburst. 'Maybe I just need some sleep...' The American country thought to himself.

When he finally got home, he took off his gloves to look at the crack. It had gotten bigger. Not by a lot, but America could most definitely tell it was bigger. America didn't know what to do. Now that there was a meeting, he wouldn't be able to suddenly fly back to D.C. for his doctor's appointment. The country sighed, went on his phone, and rescheduled the appointment to when he got back. America just hoped that it no-one would notice how he's suddenly wearing gloves. Since America was also becoming paranoid he was also trying to reason with himself that there was no possible way it could become really bad before the meeting was over, right?

America hoped so, anyway.

America half-heartedly watered the iris, changed into his pajamas, and went to bed. This time, he didn't bother taking his sunglasses off.

--~--

America opened his eyes to a room that felt so familiar and yet so far away. He contemplated where he was for a bit until he finally recognized it- it was a base that he used sometimes during the Cold War. This dream, however, was different in the fact that America was looking in on a past version of himself. Britain was with past America, looking unsure. "Are you still sure you want to do this, son?"

America heard himself say, "Yes. This is the only way."

Britain winced and reasoned, "Charging in there and attempting to shoot ***him*** *will only cause war, and you know it."*

Past America's face hardened and he yelled, "What else am I supposed to do? Sit idly by as people are ***killed*** *trying to escape East Germany at the Berlin Wall?! That wall is a divider! It has divided family, friends, and most of all, it has* ***killed people!*** *"*

Britain started to look frustrated, "But killing him will only kill even more people in the end. It's a short-term solution, not a long-term one. The most you can do is watch from the sidelines and hope the people themselves do something."

Past America looked at Britain with a distraught face, "So I just have to sit there and watch while people die in front of my face ***again?*** *"*

America's father looked distraught as well. It was obvious to Britain that he had hit a sore subject. Britain knew that this idea of America's was an awful one and that it should be stopped, but he wasn't sure how his son would react if he said no. Britain had to think of something quick, "I guess..."-Britain paused, unsure-" You can help from the sidelines! Jumping in there now and trying to kill things will only make things worse for everyone. So instead, you could maybe keep him distracted while you help people escape, okay? Just... don't get caught or do

anything stupid."

Past America looked relieved, "Thanks, Dad."

He chuckled- crisis averted, "You know son, you're a grown, independent man. You don't need my approval." America smiled at his father as Britain continued, "Uh, nevermind, you do. But, so you don't get caught by your fingerprints, here." Britain handed the American a pair of white gloves, similar to his own gloves. Past America gave his father a grateful smile and claimed, "I won't let you down, dad.

"I promise."

... But that's when things truly became real. Suddenly, Present America was launched into his own body and got to see things he had long forgotten, and for good reason. He saw flashes of all the times he failed helping people escape, every plan that went wrong, and everyone's reactions when he, the Great United States of America, failed. Once again, he felt the pressure of all those people. Those people begging to be saved, those people begging for the fighting to stop, and those people begging for America to look around and see all of the pain he didn't mean to cause. All of those voices and opinions crashed down on America, causing the country to curl up and plug his ears. When he realized the voices wouldn't stop, America simply hugged himself and cried out, "I'm sorry!" He repeated this phrase over and over again, getting quieter each time he said it.

--~--

America didn't realize he had woken up until he discovered he could willingly open his eyes and get out of that nightmare. But, he wasn't sure he wanted to. He felt so guilty for all the people he left behind and... forgot about. He felt disgusted with himself, disgusted with the fact that he had forgotten all those people, all those civilians who had died because of him and his poor choices. How could he have forgotten so easily? Why had memories of them slipped away so fast?

America didn't know why or how but he still felt frustrated with himself. He clenched his fist, trying to remind himself that he had to be strong, he was going to the UN Headquarters today and he

needed to at least look and act good for his people. He should at least be able to do that. So, America bottled up his twisting emotions and took a deep breath. He did his morning routine and decided he would bring the iris with him. It was mostly on a whim, but it was more because that iris calmed him. He would need it at the meetings to come. When America finally looked at himself in the mirror, though, he noticed his very red and puffy eyes. There was only one solution, hide it with his glasses.

America continued his morning routine, eating breakfast and packing. While America was packing, he heard his phone buzz. It was a call from someone named Daphne. America answered the call and it turns out that Daphne was that woman from earlier! Once again, America apologized but she said it was fine, everyone has their bad days. Relieved he didn't mess up that bad, America smiled. Daphne went ahead and told America that his flight would be in an hour and that his limo to drive him to the airport would be at his house in thirty minutes. She also told him that she would've been coming along with him, but something came up last minute, so he was going alone. America had a sinking feeling he was the reason she wasn't coming.

Memories he didn't want to remember rushed into his head. To focus on what Daphne was saying, he had to forcibly shove them away. Eventually, Daphne said goodbye and America realized he only had 25 minutes to get ready. Hurriedly, America finished eating, packing, and whatever else he needed to do. Somehow, he got outside to the limo on time, holding his iris in his hands. Since he was taking a private jet, he could just put his iris in front of him during the flight.

---x--- (time skep)

America was finally in New York. The flight was a bit bumpy, but it was only an hour long, so it didn't matter. All of the countries would be staying in a hotel close to the UN Headquarters and they would be driven over to the headquarters every day. Some countries decided to share bigger rooms, but not America. He's a single pringle and he's proud. After a long process of grabbing his stuff and being driven to the right hotel, America checked into the hotel and got to his suite on floor 17. America chuckled to himself

when he noticed his room number was 1776 and got inside. He set the iris down on the counter and immediately afterwards fell onto the couch.

This will be a long week and a half.

HEY Y'ALL

SECOND CHAPTER IN A DAY YAY

This chapter was honestly supposed to be two chapters but I couldn't put enough detail in the second half and got lazy so it's a part of this chapter now yayy

Honestly, I'm still way too paranoid cuz I think ppl will judge meh but this is f i n e

I'll just go back into my corner now and die-

Tschüss!

-Selva

Ch 4: The First Meeting // The Vodka Man

[image]

America woke up on his hotel room's couch after another bad dream.

He didn't want to talk about it.

Long story short, America got another night of bad memories he had forgotten. Specifically, they were about 9/11.

Another one of his regrets.

Heck, America didn't even know how he could forget all those people who were his friends, his allies, his friends, especially those who had existed merely a decade before.

But most importantly, how could he forget the people he was supposed to save instead of leaving them on the floor to rot. America hated himself. How did he forget them? How could he forget them? If he can't remember them, who is he exactly? A monster? Someone who wouldn't hesitate to forget the people that sacrificed themselves for him?

Who was he exactly?

He wasn't a hero. He couldn't even save his friends.

No, he's- he's-

America couldn't find the right word as guilt filled his chest. Suddenly a word was placed into his mind. He knew the right word now, but somehow it also felt... unnatural.

He's **worthless**.

America shook his head as he got up. That word felt so right and

yet so wrong at the same time. It felt as though two sides of his mind were fighting each other. He was starting to get a headache. He sighed, rubbed the bridge of his nose, and went to go get some water. When he got to the kitchen, he checked the time. 4:00 AM. He had slept for around ten hours. Ten hours of nightmares.

Nice.

America drank his water and decided to visit a monument today. Why the heck not. He needed to clear his head so why not go to a monument in New York. He didn't have anything to do really. Wednesday through Friday, though advertised as meeting days, were really just planned meeting dates between two or more countries about politics, trade deals, etc. It was just more convenient to do them the week before the actual, world-wide meetings.

He searched the internet for any kind of memorial. He found one called the Teardrop Memorial. It was about an hour's drive away, but he had a ton of time to kill. He ordered his limo and started his long drive. An hour later, he arrived at the memorial. He now knew a lot about this building. It was a gift from Russia, actually, as a memorial to the victims of 9/11, of which 26 were Russians. It is also a very controversial monument because of how it looks.

America got out of his limo and walked up to the monument, surprised when he saw a particular Russian standing in front of it. America cleared his throat, causing the Russian to turn around.

Russia looked at America. For once, America didn't see him with a cigarette or a bottle of vodka. He almost always had one of them with him whenever he wasn't at a meeting. The Russian looked eerily tired and looked at the American with a straight face, emotionless.

"What are you doing here?" America broke the silence. Things had never been great between him and the commie, but America had a feeling that if they fought now, it would only add to America's guilt. Maybe he should try becoming friends with the Russian, it might improve his self-esteem.

Self-esteem. America really needs that right now.

Russia blatantly said, "I could ask the same of you."

America didn't say anything after that. He didn't exactly have a response he wanted to share. The silence dragged out until America finally asked, "Why did you make this monument anyway?"

"Though we may technically be enemies, what happened was still awful. I have a heart, unlike you." Russia looked at America for a moment on those final words and then continued to look at the monument.

Ouch. America didn't need to hear that right now. He was at an all-time low already. He still felt guilt pouring over him and realized he agreed with the Russian for once. America said in a sad tone, "Yeah, I guess I don't have one."

That caught Russia's attention. He had only been half-heartedly paying attention to the American, but this caught him off guard. America would never say that. He was far too arrogant and far too proud to admit something like that, right? Maybe he didn't know the American as well as he thought he did. Though he would never admit it, Russia was curious about this new side of America. But he mostly felt worried. As he said before, Russia may be cold, but he isn't heartless. He knows what warmth is, what family is, and whatever was going on with America felt wrong somehow. He was worried, but he decided not to press on it. Right now didn't seem to be the time for personal questions, Russia could tell by the look in the American's eyes.

America's awful at hiding his emotions.

Meanwhile, America was contemplating life itself. Physically, he felt awful, not to mention mentally. He still had that headache from earlier, too. In general, the American felt awful. The dragging and awkward silence between him and Russia wasn't exactly helping his current emotional state and he was starting to get anxiety.

A voice broke the silence, it was Russia's, "When we sent this over- I can't say the same for others- but I actually felt bad for you,

Америка. Your people didn't seem to like it all that much though," Russia chuckled and shook his head.

America watched as Russia turned around, heading for the exit, "Have a nice day, Америка." And with that, he left.

America was surprised at Russia's sudden somewhat-nice state. America, who was very used to Russia yelling and arguing with him, was actually kind of happy he didn't fight with the Russian. It was nice, actually, to pretend as though Russia was a friend of his, and they weren't at each other's throats every second of their lives. Happy, America ended up staying at the monument for at least an hour before heading back to his limo. After another hour, he got back to the hotel.

In the hallway in front of America's room, America ran into Russia again. Russia was talking to Finland, specifically having a heated argument on alcohol, with Finland arguing that Kossu is the best alcohol, and with Russia arguing that Vodka is obviously the best. America chuckled and waved to the two of them. Finland noticed and waved back, while Russia nodded in recognition.

At least there's some progress there. After a few moments, however, the two countries plunged back into their argument full force. America chuckled to himself, opening the door to his hotel room. America thought to himself while he was entering his room,

'That strange Vodka Man.'

Heyo peeps

The Vodka Man has finally been introduced. Honestly, I was planning on putting more speech in here but w h a t e v e r. Talking? Pfft, don't need that here.

So ye

I'm having an awful time finding good songs that aren't too extreme for these depressing chapters soooo take this song

America has also started becoming a depresso espresso

The poor bean, I feel bad.

Jk, I really don't-

Tschüss!

-Selva

Ch 5: Anna // The Girl that Wasn't Saved

[image]

America went inside his apartment and fell onto his couch. He was laying there for a while, and was so out of it and sleep-deprived that he must have fallen asleep.

--~--

America was launched into memory after memory, each one only lasting a few seconds each. They were all during the civil war. One in particular, however, lasted more than a few seconds.

America watched a past version of him pace around, obviously stressed. This one seemed to be before the civil war. America heard past him muttering and found himself listening in out of habit.

"What the hell? Why is everything falling apart?" Past America looked at his own hand for a second and only then did Present America notice that he had cracks, too. America suddenly remembered this. He has *gotten cracks before-*

*Past America interrupted his train of thought, "Why is this happening?! I don't f*cking bleed anymore and then my eyes casually start going black like ok-" He was interrupted by a string of awful coughs that went on for way too long. When Past America was done coughing, He started looking at his hand for way too long, "I now apparently cough f*cking black stuff now."*

Present America looked at his own increasingly cracked hand in fear. This is what the crack causes? He had completely forgotten about all of this. But- why did he forget? The memory suddenly ended, leaving America in a black void.

America was honestly just about halfway done with everything when the memories started again. This time they were longer and crueler. America

was forced to sit there and watch his friends and allies die over and over again. Sometimes, he joined them in the fighting. And after multiple repeats of the same vicious cycle, he gave up trying to fight and let himself get shot multiple times, over and over again. Each time he was shot, he felt relieved actually.

Why?

Because it meant he wouldn't just stand there and watch his friends die. He never could save them, because he was never on time.

He was always one second too late.

And then, ***BANG!***

They were on the floor, another body for the count.

And every time, America was left there, alone with his thoughts and tremendous guilt weighing on his shoulders.

"It's all your fault they're dead." *An eerily familiar voice said in his ear,* ***"You're always fashionably late, never on time. Maybe if you weren't so worthless you could save them."***

America could feel tears on his cheeks as he found himself agreeing with those cruel words.

"You're worthless, America, unable to save a few measly human lives."

Suddenly, America was in front of what looked to be mountains upon mountains of bodies.

"You see that, America? I'm sure you recognize some of those faces. Kevin, Lynn, Samuel, Anna... All of these bodies are the people you failed to save."

America whispered, "I'm sorry-"

"Are you happy, America? Are you happy that all these people are dead? You practically all sent them to their deaths, like lambs to the slaughter."

America reached his hand out to all the people, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to-"

"Mean to what? Kill us?" *America was horrified when he noticed that the people in front of him- dead people- were saying this, but he also felt incredible guilt weighing on his heart.*

"I didn't mean to, I just wanted to help-" America started looking at the floor.

"Is this your definition of help, Mr. America?" *It was a tiny voice, one he remembered far too well. Anna.*

"Anna, I-" America looked up to see a horrifying sight. Anna was above him, her skin far too pale and her eyes pitch black. This was even more terrifying considering Anna looked to be the same age as when she died- 10.

"It's too late for apologies now, Mr. America," *Anna said, looking straight at America, the wound that caused her death painfully obvious.*

"You were the one who stood there and let me die."

"I didn't mean to-"

"YOU KILLED ME!" *America's heart broke when she said that.*

She was right. He was too late. He tried to stop her, but her body was on the ground, bleeding out from a critical bullet wound before he could even take a step forward to stop her. It was all flooding back to him- the way she smiled, the way she talked, her ambition to become an artist and make her parents proud. If America hadn't interfered, she'd be alive right now. If America had told her to stay away instead of letting her come along, she would've lived that horrible day.

"I'm sorry... I'm so, so sorry..." America felt even more tears on his cheeks.

"Sorry won't cut it anymore, Mister."

And with that, she faded away. Leaving America to sit there and cry, all alone in that pitch-black void with nothing but the bodies of those he

couldn't save and the tremendous guilt of his actions weighing down on him.

--~--

When America woke up, he almost forgot what happened in his dreams. But he didn't. After a few seconds, he remembered everything and felt terrible in so many ways.

"... I'm sorry, Anna, I really am..." America said to himself. It was more of a way of dealing with the guilt than an actual apology- since she already rejected his apologies- but it helped. Somewhat.

It was Thursday morning. America had a pretty minor meeting with NATO in the afternoon. Due to convenience, NATO had decided to come over for the entirety of the week so that if countries wanted to, they could appoint a meeting with him and talk to him.

America went into the kitchen and decided he didn't want to eat anything. His dream made him lose his appetite. He wasn't even sure he wanted to eat anymore at all. He felt worthless and guilty. America went to his bathroom and looked at himself in the mirror. He noticed how his eyes were starting to turn gray. America also went to check on his cracks. They were several times worse than last night. Last night, they stretched across his hand. Now, they stretched across his right forearm. He was starting to get cracks on the fingertips of his left hands, too.

America heaved a long sigh. This will be a hard week to get through, especially now that his cracks are getting worse. America contemplated finding a doctor before Monday to help him; but, a strange voice, very similar to the voice in his dream, told him that he didn't deserve a doctor since the others couldn't have one before they died. America didn't want to have a fight in his head again and get another headache, so he simply accepted that thought. America still got the headache though. He felt it coming on and sighed. He was honestly done with the world and America was pretty sure the world was done with him.

America sighed, and was about to leave the bathroom when he looked at the old scars on his eyes. America felt where they were

and couldn't help but think about how ugly they were. "At least now they won't be as ugly as my actual eyes," America commented to himself, noting how quickly his eyes were going gray. With a frown, America put on his sunglasses and started to get ready for his meeting with NATO.

---x---

The meeting was nothing special, it just lasted way longer than it should've. Way too many complications that honestly should've been sorted out beforehand, but that's fine. America looked at his hotel bed and decided he was going to pull an all-nighter. It would be hard, but the fear of going back to that nightmare would drive America onward. America stayed up all night, browsing on the internet and doing random things. At some point in the night, America's stomach grumbled and America realized he hadn't eaten since yesterday. America got an apple with the intention of eating it, but something felt wrong when he bit into the apple, so after about five bites, America threw out the apple.

Everything just felt wrong to America today.

---x---

Eventually, morning came and America heard a knock on the door. He opened the door to see an enthusiastic yet terrified Canada.

"What's up, bro?" America winced at how awful his voice sounded, but Canada didn't seem to notice.

"UKRAINEASKEDMEOUTWHATDOIDO?"

America, sleep-deprived, did not understand a word his brother said. Honestly, Canada was kind of acting like a child who was just given a piece of candy. "Say that again... but slower."

Canada took a deep breath in, "Ukraine. Asked. Me. Out."

America blinked, then smiled, "That's great, bro! Ukraine's been your crush for years, right?"

"Shush!" Canada said, "No one must know."

"Pfft, ok."

"But what do I do?" Canada asked.

"Be the best gay flirt you can be and immediately go for gold." America joked, winking and giving his brother finger guns.

Canada looked at America as if he was a crazy, homeless man. "Are you crazy? Actually, nevermind, that sounds like advice you would give."

America laughed at that, but it was more of a forced laugh than anything. That comment was really supposed to be a joke, but Canada took it seriously. Did he really come off like that to his own brother? For Russia, it's understandable, but America felt awful. He would change that right now. He'll become the best f*cking brother in the whole wide world so that he isn't just that arrogant b@stard in the corner, flipping people off.

"Well, be nice as usual. If Ukraine asked you out, that means he likes you for you. So just... be Canada. The nice dude in the corner getting drunk on maple syrup."

Canada looked at America for a second, looked at the floor for a second, and then looked at America, saying, "That advice actually isn't half-bad."

"Ouch, does my advice not meet your standards?"

"Thanks bro, I need to go now to get ready!" Canada smiled, avoiding America's question completely. Ouch.

America smiled and closed his hotel door. Once it was closed, he put his forehead on the door.

"Am I really seen as such a heartless sh!t?"

Hi!

I'm having difficulties choosing songs for each chapter but

that's fine.

I also only just realized that I gave myself waaaay too much time in the story to build America's depresso espresso state.

Anyway, now that most of the big plot points have been set in place, it's time to start the main country meetings. So, big time skip coming up

Tschüss!

-Selva

Ch 6: One Good Memory is all it Takes // The Lone Star

[image]

Monday morning...

If only the days hadn't dragged on for so long. America was hungry, sleep-deprived, now has low self-esteem due to what could most likely be described as PTSD and just, in general, felt like a bag of sh!t.

All in all, pretty great.

America had been procrastinating on watering his iris, saying he'd do it today but he didn't feel like it today, either. As a summary for what happened on Friday till now, Canada did the date with Ukraine, they're most likely a gay couple now (or close to it), America hasn't seen Russia for the past few days, Japan came over yesterday to steal all of America's pocky (America doesn't really care cause he wasn't gonna eat them anyway), America accidentally broke a glass vase in the hallway and is too lazy to pick it all up, and America still needs to talk to Southie about his crush on the anime girl. Other than that, America's just been casually starving himself and trying not to fall asleep. The only hope America had for this week was that one, people won't notice how awful America looks, and two, that America doesn't fall asleep during the meetings or just fall asleep in general.

America had these hopes but he was 99% sure that the world hated him and he won't get all that he wishes for. So, America is just hoping he can last the week. He got ready for the meeting and got his driver to drive him there early. This time he **will** be early. He owed it to so many people...

America quickly got inside the car, shook away his incoming depressing thoughts and instead paid attention to the city around him, sighing.

--~--

America must have fallen asleep because he was in a place he didn't recognize. It was a forest, though America couldn't tell where. It somehow felt very familiar.

"Mr. America?" A quiet voice behind him whispered.

America felt tears hit his eyes as he recognized that voice. 'No, no... no no no no no nonononono, not this, anything but this. Any other memory, please!' America thought, but the world didn't change. He was stuck here. Stuck here with his worst regret.

America turned around to see Anna. The little girl with brown hair and blue eyes.

"Mr. America, why are you crying?" Anna asked, her voice the exact same as how it used to be.

America quickly wiped away his tears, crouched down, and held Anna by her shoulders, his head hanging down. "I'm so sorry, Anna... I'm so sorry..."

"Sorry for what, Mr. America?" He heard Anna say. America didn't want to look up. He knew what he was going to see if he looked up. He couldn't feel Anna's shoulders anymore. 'No, don't look up, don't look up,' America screamed to himself, but something, someone, lifted his head up. There Anna was, on the grass, her dress torn, and a very obvious bullet wound in her chest. The poor girl was surrounded in a pool of her own blood. America felt his body go up to the little girl and hold her.

"I did it, Mr. America... I did it..." Anna smiled weakly, her body was lighter than what it ever was before. America saw his own tears drop down onto the grass. "I did it... so why aren't you happy?"

"You didn't need to, Anna, you didn't need to."

"But he was in danger I-"

"I TOLD YOU NOT TO GO!" America yelled out, "I told you not to go... Why... why did you do it..."

Anna smiled, "Because everyone deserves to live." With that, America could no longer hear Anna's short, quick breaths. She was gone.

America had told her not to go...

But she didn't listen.

~~-~~

America woke up to his driver shaking him, telling him to get inside before he's late. America, thoroughly shaken up, didn't have time to process what his driver was saying and left the limo.

America stood there for a second, shaking, until he heard a voice and nearly died right then and there.

"Америка? Is that you?" America turned around to see a Russian in disbelief.

"Yes, I am me!" America said, faking the happiest voice he could muster. America just prayed with all his heart Russia wouldn't notice how shaken up he was.

His prayers were in vain and his heart dropped when Russia replied, "Are you ok, Америка?"

America mustered the most confused look he had in his arsenal, "Yep, I'm good, why do you ask?"

"You've just been... nice... to me lately." Russia pointed out.

Dang, America just got caught there. America really didn't want to fight today, too, so he thought of the best excuse he could think of. "Have you ever considered it's because I want your oil?"

Russia gave America a disgusted look and walked off, saying, "Good luck with that, Ублюдок," **(Bastard)**

"Yeah, you're one, too!"

Russia responded to that by flipping America off. Russia didn't know that America could understand Russian. Now Russia wasn't

even safe from the American while talking in his native language. Admittedly, Russia started getting bad vibes from the American. Not from America himself, no, but he always feels on edge while around the American nowadays. **Almost as if someone was watching them... or to be more accurate, America.** But Russia wasn't sure. Russia was actually starting to get worried. Though he doesn't know the American well and has never really been on speaking terms with him, Russia could tell something was up, though he couldn't place what. He shook these thoughts away as he finally got to the meeting room, entered, and sat in his seat near the back.

America, meanwhile, got lost on the way there. He was tired and 99% out of it, so he took a wrong turn. Or two... Or three... Either way, the American was sorely lost and kept on getting more lost. After what seemed like hours of searching, America arrived at the meeting **late.** Ouch.

Russia watched as the door was opened by- guess who?- an idiotic American. Honestly, Russia had been worried. He should've expected this though. America is consistent on one thing and one thing only, being late. Or as America always phrases it- fashionably late. Either way, Russia should've been smart and expected this.

"America, get to your seat, please." UN sighed, not even looking up from his papers.

"Got it, officer," America joked. Nobody laughed though. America went to his seat in the front and sat in it, hoping with all his might that he won't fall asleep.

---x---

That idiot. He fell asleep. Russia had honestly never been so disappointed in the American as he was now. In the middle of the meeting, his head **fell**. Everyone was terrified, only to find out he was asleep. Russia heard North Korea laughing in the corner. Japan had a face that was giving off a 'yikes' vibe, and Britain looked both worried and disappointed in his son. UN, however, was having none of this and started walking up to the sleeping American with a face that could only be described as inner rage.

America, however, wasn't doing so hot in the dream world either.

--~--

America could never get used to these horrid dreams. This one was crueler in nature- it paired the happy times with the sad times. One moment there would be a happy moment with Anna and the others, the next there would be a horrific scene with death and pain. America would've cried if he had any tears left. America hated it, but he was starting to feel numb to this whole ordeal. It only showed America that he was some horrid creature who could get used to such cruelty and hard times. Who gets used to their friends dying? America knew that he should be awake and paying attention to UN's speech but he... felt as though he deserved this cruelty and mental torture.

This way of thinking isn't healthy, sure, but America couldn't help it at this point. He was tired and he just wanted to sleep. But he couldn't sleep. The minute he slept he was tortured with memories he wishes he could forget but at the same time fears that forgetting would make him a monster. America was conflicted at every corner nowadays. It's kind of like a civil war inside his head, except whenever it happens, he gets a splitting headache.

That's fun.

A new memory, however, caught America's attention. It was a happy memory. It was him and... Texas?

Past America walked into the old bar, I guess you could call it a saloon but it wasn't really one. Past America sat next to the shorter Texan.

"It's over, huh?" Texas said as he drunk what was probably alcohol from a cup.

"Yep, we defeated the Mexicans." Past America responded with a smile.

Texas smiled back, looking at his reflection in the alcohol. "So, when will it be done?"

"It happened a few minutes ago."

Texas looked up at Past America, surprised. "Already? Wow, I didn't

know they wanted to get rid of me so soon."

Past America chuckled at that.

"So..." Texas continued, "When will I become a part of you?"

"Whenever you're ready."

"Heh, I'll be ready when I'm done with this."

They sat in silence, but it was a calming silence. A silence filled with sorrow for a life over but excitement at a new beginning. Texas eventually finished his alcohol and sat up, smiling at the American.

Texas held his hand out, "Ready, pops?"

Past America laughed at that and took the Texan's hand, "I don't think I'll ever get used to that name."

"No, I don't think you will either." The two smiled at each other like two best friends; there was that feeling of comradery in the air. "I'll see ya on the other side, partner." And with that, the Texan's body glowed and, after a while, he disappeared, becoming part of America. The Texan was now in America's mind with the others.

Past America shivered, saying, "I'll never get used to that *weird feeling."*

Past America finished his own drink and left the empty cup on the table, smiling at it, "Goodbye, my friend." And with that, he walked away, his smile quickly fading in his sudden loneliness.

America was launched into his own body and knew where he was immediately. It was the beginning of the Civil War and Texas was glaring at him, his eyes cold and unfamiliar. The Texan spat at the ground and America could only watch as he walked away towards the other Confederate states. There was a bright light, and a new mind was formed.

Confederacy.

The Confederate's face twisted into a smile, picking up Texas's prized pistol off of the ground. He aimed the pistol at America and pulled the

trigger.

@&%#%#*&%&^%#**

But this is where the dream deviated from America's memories.

Why?

Because there Texas was, taking the shot for America, his back facing America. The world around them glitched and they were now in a black void. Texas turned around and looked at the American, worried and wound-free.

"America!" The Texan yelled, obviously nervous.

America was confused. What? What is happening?!

Texas shook the American, and America focused on the Texan's words. In his worry, the poor man's accent was thicker than ever. "America, I don't have much time. Something, Someone *is interfering with your mind and we can't stop him. We're trying our best but something is* wrong *with him somehow- Please, wake up! Please, resist these dreams and thoughts or we're gonna fall apart! If this continues, you're gonna- you're gonna-"*

That's when Illinois appeared, popping into the void. "Guys, we figured out who's doing this. He's back. It's-"

$^$%&%$#^*

--~--

America shot up in his seat, his heart racing. That was all just another stupid dream, right? America had a sinking feeling it was more than a dream; but, his mind was in scrambles and he couldn't think clearly. America looked around to see many worried and disappointed countries, as well as an angry UN a couple of feet away.

UN sighed, "At least I don't have to wake you up now. Next time, America, come to the meetings well-rested, yes?"

America nodded, still awfully shaken up. The only thing America could do was hope he didn't fall asleep again and hope that once again, nobody noticed how shaken up he was.

Unluckily for America, however, Russia did notice. Russia also noticed that this was the second time this day America looked so shaken up. As for why he looked so shaken up, Russia didn't know. He also knew that if he asked America about it, the stubborn country would find some way to twist around the subject at hand. Russia sighed and decided he would simply tell UN about it afterwards. Preferably before the American could vacate the premises.

The minute the meeting ended, Russia speed-walked towards UN. "Hey UN, I think something's wrong with America."

"Why do you say that?" UN asked, not even looking up from his papers.

"I say that because that was the second time today he's looked so shaken up."

"Answer a question for me Russia, if you could. Why do you care so much?" Russia didn't have an answer for that, so UN continued, looking up from his papers, smiling, "I'm sorry if that sounded cold, but he's probably fine. You know how it is, maybe something back at DC came up and he's stressed out. But I'm sure it's nothing more than that. I'm glad you care, though. It means I'm at least doing something right."

Russia weakly smiled, he was still bothered. UN noticed this and sighed. "If you're still worried, just call me when something seems wrong with America, ok?"

Russia nodded at that, satisfied.

Something was wrong with America, and Russia was gonna find out what that little blyat was hiding.

Whooooo boy that took a while to write.

Plus it's a long boi chapter cuz I feel bad about not uploading for a while. Since I feel doubly bad, the next time I update this, I'll update two chapters.

Anyway, Detective Russ is on the scene, ready to fight... mind demon things?

Haha, you'll figure out what's wrong with America one day.

America isn't sure whether the second half of the dream was real or not.

And, his states are most likely dead oof.

Except for Texas.

Cause Texas.

Also, do you feel as though the story is progressing too fast or too slow? Cause I feel as though my pacing's off so please give me feedback if possible.

Tschüss!

-Selva

Ch 7: Falling Apart // The Broken One

A small warning before we start this chapter-

This chapter will contain very heavy topics about self-harm. If you are sensitive to this type of content, please skip this chapter.

Thank you, and have a nice day!

America finally got to his hotel room and slammed the door behind him. He felt himself hyperventilate as he fell to the floor. America simply wasn't in the right shape of mind. He was shaken up and miserable. He heard the voice again.

"You idiot, you fell asleep in the middle of the meeting? Now everyone knows how indecent you are, falling asleep while everyone else is actually trying to help.

"Now everyone knows how weak you are- shaken up by a simple dream, ha!

"Everyone would be happier if you weren't there. Or- even better- if you didn't exist!"

The final one hit hard. America honestly hadn't thought of it. He was both disgusted by the idea and oddly fascinated with it. It sounded so simple. But... did the other countries really hate him that much?

"Of course they do, why else did they look so disappointed in you?"

"But what about those who were worried- I'm sure they care-"

The voice interrupted, angry, "**They were worried that you had ruined the entire meeting. Did you even notice what the meeting was about?**"

America didn't know, so the voice continued, "**The meeting was about nuclear weapons, you dingus. And you want to know what you did while they were talking about nuclear weapons? You. Fell. Asleep. Great impression on the others, I'd say.**"

America felt his heart drop. That's what they were talking about? Now America felt even more disgusted with himself than before.

"**I think Anna would be *proud* of what you've become, you monster.**" The voice said sarcastically.

America felt guilt consume him and he felt hot tears on his cheeks. But the voice only laughed, "**Ha! You're *crying?!* After all you've done, you think you have the right to cry about it? Hahaha, this is all your fault. It's all your fault they're dead, and your fault you're in this mess. When Texas and the others left you, they were right to do so!**"

America could only sob at that. The voice was right. He had no right to cry. He had no right to be happy now that they're gone. Not when he could've saved them but didn't. America looked up, wiping away his tears. "How can I make this right?"

The voice was silent for a while until he heard the voice again, amusement in its voice, "**It's simple, really. They went through so much pain, so I think it's only fair if you do, too.**" America felt a hand move his head to look at something. He found himself looking at the broken shards of what used to be a glass vase. He felt his heart drop as he heard the voice say, "**Do it, America. Cut yourself.**"

America shook his head weakly, something felt wrong about this, "No this... this doesn't seem right."

"**Do it.**"

"N-no, I-I-"

"**America,**" The voice said sternly. "**You've killed so many people in war, how is this any different? Heck, you deserve so much worse than this. You are a disgusting, ugly, scarred, cracked, closeted gay *monster*. You deserve all of this and worse. I wonder what your parents would think if they truly knew about all you've done. About your sexuality, your scars, and truly how many you've killed. Heck, France isn't even your real mom. Your real mom left you for dead because she knew far before anyone else that you'd be a monster. You're a monster, America**

"And everyone would be better off with you dead."

America had to use every scrap of willpower to fight against those words. It didn't feel right somehow. America couldn't explain it. It was like the promise that he made to Texas was urging him on, but was that really possible? America didn't know. America readied himself for what he was about to do.

"I-" He took a deep breath and continued, "I don't want to do this. I don't know what you are- if your my stupid self-consciousness or something- but this isn't what I want. I messed up, I messed up bad, sure- but I don't want *this*. This- this- this won't bring them back. This won't heal the wounds I have in my heart." ....*But can't it ease the pain?* A voice inside of America's mind whispered. He shook his thoughts away, trying to focus on the here and now, blotting out the voice's remarks against him as well as the thoughts inside his own head.

America looked at the pile of glass and decided to get rid of the temptation. He didn't trust himself with it there. He slowly but surely picked it up, but his mind was somewhere else, fighting these temptations. A part of him wanted to do it- but the rational side of America wouldn't let him. America decided to mostly follow the rational him for now. Once he had cleaned the whole mess, he collapsed on the couch.

He was tempted to fall asleep just to torture himself when the doorbell rang.

Who could that be...?

MMM yes.

I got a bit tired while writing this, so it's a bit short. What can you expect? I decided to redo this entire chapter and the next chapter cuz I was making things happen too fast and I want things to feel natural... ya know?

No music for this cuz I couldn't find music that fit the theme of this chapter right :/ HMMM

But,

wHo cOuLd iT Be aT tHE DoOr?

Haha, guess you'll have to find out.

Tschüss!

-Selva

Ch 8: Detective Russia on The Scene // The Investigation

[image]

An hour earlier...

Russia sighed when he got outside. He hadn't caught up to America after the meeting. The little blyat had run away before Russia could catch up with him. The shorter country was surprisingly fast.

Russia went to his car. Unlike America, he didn't have a fancy driver, he's just renting a car for the week and a half. Russia got inside the car and started to drive away, worried. He and America never liked each other, but Russia couldn't help but worry. He was curious about what was happening to the smaller country.

Russia needed alcohol, he had been sober for so long that he was actually starting to pay attention to that annoyance.

Russia got to the hotel and went to the apartment he decided to share with two of his siblings: Ukraine and Belarus. It was just easier to share the big apartments so it wasn't lonely. It was right next to America's, too- room number 1774. Russia went inside his own apartment to find it all neat and clean. Russia suddenly thought about how there's no way America would keep his apartment clean, but quickly shook the thought away. Ukraine was sitting on the couch, holding his phone and smiling to himself. He was probably texting someone. As to who, Russia didn't know and Russia didn't think Ukraine wanted him to know. Russia went up to his kitchen cupboard to find his vodka. He finally found a bottle and grabbed it. He was about to open it and take a swig when he hesitated. Russia thought he heard something. It kind of sounded like a muffled sob.

Russia looked around, Ukraine wasn't the one who sobbed and Belarus was out in New York doing whatever. He was about to shrug it off as him being insane until he heard the noise again, this

time it was a little bit louder. Russia searched for the source of the noise, but the noise didn't happen again. Russia didn't know where the noise came from, but he decided he'll find out so that he won't be interrupted while drinking his vodka. He did feel bad for whoever it was that was crying, but he was also too sober for this sh*t.

Russia went out into the hallway band low and behold, Finland was right there. Did Russia mention how much he dislikes Finland? Yeah, Russia and Finland aren't exactly best buds. They argue about alcohol, the winter war, sports, basically everything. Russia never liked the dude, and he was right there, flirting with Estonia.

See, Russia has a big family with around 14 siblings and, as the oldest, he is super protective of each and every one of them. Estonia just happens to be Russia's sister and Finland was flirting with her right there, exactly in front of Russia's apartment. This definitely wasn't Finland's best decision. Russia quickly became mad. Estonia was laughing and giggling at Finland's flirts when she finally noticed Russia. She went deathly silent and started mouthing something along the lines of "no" and "don't you dare" to Russia. Finland eventually noticed her expression and turned to look at what she was looking at. He turned around to see an angry Russian that was having none of this. Finland's smile dropped. He looked scared, just how Russia likes it.

Russia rolled up his sleeves and got ready to ward off a certain nordic country.

---x---

Long story short, Finland won't be pulling that again. Estonia had watched the full thing, trying to prevent the fight. When it was over, Estonia looked at her elder brother, a frustrated expression clear on her face, "Russia, what the hell was that for?!"

Russia simply gave her a look, "I had to stop him from flirting with you! You know how much Finland has wronged us!"

"Wronged us?" Estonia replied, quickly growing mad herself. "**No.** He wronged отец **(father)**, Russia, not us. Open your eyes, we're

not him! We don't have to follow through on his grudges anymore! Why can't you see that?!" That's when tears came to her eyes, but she quickly wiped them away. She turned away from Russia, sighing, "Why can't you see that?..."

Russia reached for her sister, but the minute Estonia saw his hand, she smacked it away. She continued speaking, her voice weary and tired. "This is why almost all of us left home if you could even call it that. We're all tired of you clinging to the past- clinging to him. We want you to move on, Russia, but all you're doing is dragging us down with you." She paused for a few moments, but continued, "I'll tell you a secret, Russia. I love Finn. I love him so, so much. I decided to move on from stupid grudges long ago, and, after a while, I found out that I love him." She turned around to look at Russia. "Maybe you should do the same- move on. You might find someone you love with all your heart, just like I did. Maybe then we can all be happy again because you'll *finally* understand." Hope sparkled in her gaze and she turned around to look at her brother, but that hopeful gaze quickly faded away. "Until then, stop interfering with my life. I don't want to fight you again, brother." She looked at Russia, a sad look in her eyes. She eventually turned around and walked away, leaving Russia standing there.

Russia didn't know how to feel. He wanted to feel mad, but he couldn't. Was Estonia right? Was he really clinging to grudges that were no longer his own? Russia shook his head and quickly tried to get his mind back on track.

He was supposed to ask if his neighbors are ok and stop them from crying, right? That wouldn't be too hard. To avoid America if possible, Russia first went to apartment 1772. He rang the doorbell (since they have one of those) and waited until France opened the door. She smiled slightly, "Bonjour, Russia! What brings you here?"

"Were you crying earlier?" Russia asked bluntly.

"Non non **(No, no)**, I wasn't crying and my husband wasn't crying, either. Why do you ask?"

"No reason." Russia lied. He didn't want to have to explain himself.

France looked skeptical, but simply said, "Well then, is that all, Russia?"

Russia nodded and France smiled, saying, "Bonne journée, Russie **(Have a good day, Russia.)**"

Russia didn't exactly understand what she said, but he understood that she was probably saying goodbye or something and said his goodbyes as well, heading for room 1776.

When Russia got to the door, he contemplated his life choices for a little bit until something dawned on him.

America's been acting weird lately and he's most likely the one crying; so if whatever it is going on with America is serious enough for him to cry about it, then it must be more than something simple going wrong at DC. It's probably big, or personal. Russia started contemplating what he was about to get into before he thought, 'f*ck it, I'm doing this.'

Russia hesitantly rang the doorbell.

...

America curiously looked at the door. Who could it be...? The American quickly got up and put on his father's gloves, making sure his cracks couldn't be seen. After making sure he physically looked ok to anyone who might be at the door, he went up to the door, mentally prepared himself, and opened it.

He was not mentally prepared enough for who was at the door.

It was Russia, his expression forcibly neutral, but it didn't look forced to America. America was both shocked and terrified as to why Russia was at the door. Why was Russia at the door?! Did he do something wrong? He's probably here to talk about his gigantic failure during the meeting- Russia's voice interrupted America's thoughts.

"Привет Америка, могу я войти? (**Hello America, may I come in?)**"

America, who was in a state of terror, just let Russia in. America hoped Russia wasn't here to talk about the meeting.

Russia looked around America's hotel room. He noticed how the vase on the coffee table, that every apartment had, was gone, and how it looked like there were minuscule glass shards on the ground. "What happened to your vase, Америка? Isn't there one in every room?"

America looked at where Russia was looking and winced at the fact that there were tiny glass shards on the ground. He must have been so out of it while cleaning up the glass that he didn't notice them. "I broke my vase accidentally. I cleaned it up, I guess I missed a few shards." America tried to convince his voice to not sound convincing and unconcerned, but America wasn't succeeding.

Russia narrowed his eyes at America's failed attempt and sounding unconcerned but decided not to overthink it, he was already worrying way too much and needed vodka after the encounter with his sister. He plopped down on the couch and started thinking about what Estonia had said in the hallway. In a fit of sudden childishness, Russia suddenly blurted out, "Hey Америка, let's start over, ok?"

America looked at Russia, confused, "What?"

Russia looked directly at America, got up, and stood right in front of the American, holding his hand out. "Америка. Let's start over, ok? Esti told me to forgive and forget, so why not? Let's start over, starting right now."

America felt tears coming to his eyes. Starting over. Yes, that's just the thing he needs right now! One less thing to feel guilty about! A fresh start with his enemy- no, ex-enemy now. America gladly took Russia's hand and shook it. "Let's start over, Russia." He smiled at Russia, and Russia somewhat smiled back. Though America wished the fleeting happiness could last, it didn't. Russia stopped shaking his hand, and the moment was gone.

Russia, who had felt the gloves, asked America, "What's with the gloves?"

America quickly felt dread and put on his best fake smile, "The gloves? Oh, I wore them to the meeting today, I just haven't taken them off yet."

"Why'd you take them to the meeting?"

"Cause I wanted to?" America faked his best questioning voice and look, trying to sell off the fact that this question is weird and Russia should really stop, but Russia wasn't cooperating with him.

"What's the real reason?" The Russian narrowed his eyes. At this point, Russia was going off of his gut feeling and something about the American's eyes didn't feel right. America looked confused and weirded out, but his eyes looked... familiar somehow. They looked- how do you phrase it- sad but scared. But sad wasn't the right word, not really.

America replied, trying to keep his cool, "What real reason? That is the real reason."

Russia thought, 'He's hiding something from me.' Without thinking, the Russian started reaching for America's gloves so that he can take them off.

America noticed, however, and quickly smacked Russia's hand away, his face could only be described as fear. But what is he so afraid of? America started breathing heavily and started to push Russia out of his hotel room, no words spoken. Though Russia is the taller one, America is undoubtedly the stronger one. Despite his struggles, Russia was being pushed out and when Russia was finally outside of the room, America slammed the door behind him.

"Well that was a bit excessive," Russia said to himself. "What the heck are you hiding, Америка?"

On the other side of the door, America put his forehead to the door, hyperventilating. Russia was so close to seeing America's cracks and he just- reacted. America felt awful. He had just shoved Russia out without reason and felt awful for it. Just as he was feeling a little bit better, too. Now Russia will never want to talk to him. America stumbled backward a bit at that thought. It bothered him somehow.

In the echoing silence, America started to hear the damned voice again, berating him for his awful actions.

America started to regret throwing those glass shards away.

Wow, ok that was a lot.

So just as Russia and America agreed to start over, America pushes him away (There is some sort of symbolism there lol)

France has made a cameo yay! She'll be the star of the next chapter, btw.

Also, DOUBLE CHAPTER WOW

I'm tired. I got a lot of school work but I'll manage.

Somehow.

Anywho, I translate everything using google translate, so if any of my translations are wrong, please correct me!

WELP, time to go to sleep if I can.

Tschüss!

-Selva

Ch 9: A Worried Mother // The Wilting Flower

[image]

France closed the door as Russia left, probably to go to his other neighbor. France was confused. Crying? Who was crying? France went up to the couch in the middle of her shared apartment with her husband Britain and sat down on it.

She looked at Britain, who was sitting in a chair near the window reading an old book. "Mon Cher **(My dear)**, do you know who is in room 1776?"

Britain looked up from his book, thought about it for a little bit, and then responded, "I believe it's America in that room. Why do you ask, darling?"

France started to get worried, why was Amérique **(America)** crying? It must have been him who Russia heard. France really was justified in her worry, too. Earlier, she had noticed America falling asleep at the meeting- he's never done that before- and told Britain about her worries after the meeting; but, her husband had shrugged it off as 'normal America.' France started talking about her worries to Britain again.

"Mon Cher? You heard what Russia was asking about, Oui **(Yes)**?"

"Of course I did."

"Do you think Amérique was the one crying?"

Britain frowned at that. "You think so? I don't think he's the type to cry."

"Maybe it's a really serious problem! My poor bébé **(baby)**!" France was about to go run to America's room when Britain grabbed her hand. France turned around at the sudden contact.

"I'm sure America is fine, darling. I know my son is a strong young man, just like me," Britain smiled.

France raised her eyebrow at that, "You mean just like what you used to be, mon cher?"

Britain chuckled at that, "I'm not old, France."

"You sure sound old to me."

They continued smiling and teasing each other for a while until France had mostly calmed down. They eventually sat down on the couch and France was tempted to stay there with her amour **(love)**, but her motherly instincts were too strong. Even though America wasn't her real son, she would forever see him as her bébé and needed to make sure he was ok. Britain agreed to her decision (even though he didn't think it was that serious) so that her mind would be at peace. He even decided to make dinner for both of them while France checked on America.

France left their room and headed towards America's room in a hurry. She had already waited long enough. She rang America's doorbell and he answered, saying, "Russia I don't want to tal-" He paused and it finally processed in his brain that his mom was outside his door, not Russia. "Mom? What are you doing here?"

"Mon bébé! Je suis inquiet pour toi Depuis Que la Russie est arrivée chez nous plus tôt dans la journée! Est ce que ça va? As-tu Besoin d'aide? **(My baby! I've been worried about you ever since Russia came to our door earlier today! Are you okay? Do you need help?)**"

America blinked for a few seconds and then said, "Mom, I'm completely fine. What about Russia coming to your door?"

France answered, "He came to our door earlier today asking if your père **(father)** or I were crying."

France could've sworn she heard America lightly curse at that.

"Mon fils, may I come in?"

"Why?"

France narrowed her eyes at that. Why would Amérique ask that? It's like he doesn't want her inside- What is going on with her son? Is there something he's hiding from her inside of his apartment? "I want to make sure you're ok."

"I'm fine, mom."

"Amérique, please let me in." France replied, a serious tone creeping in on her voice.

America grew silent and, after a moment's hesitation, opened the door. France went inside and noticed a couple of things. One, the vase in the middle of the coffee table was gone. Two, an iris was on the counter, wilting. After a little bit, France realized that was the iris she had given to her son long ago! Or, it was a very similar iris to the original. But... why would Amérique let it wilt? He would never let that flower wilt, he promised to France that he would take care of it...

France heard America plop down on the couch and turned to see him facing the window. Using her little window of time, France went up to the iris and felt it. It really was wilting. France suddenly knew, with dread in her heart, that something very wrong was happening with America; and, her fils wasn't even telling her what was happening. France then had an idea. She knew who could help her figure out what was going on with her fils.

For the next ten minutes or so, France talked about random things with America until it was a reasonable time for her to leave, making sure her son didn't catch onto what she figured out. She had a feeling that if she told her son what she had figured out, he would only isolate himself further. She noticed with intense worry that he was faking his smiles, what is he hiding? France eventually said her goodbyes and left, immediately heading for room 1774.

No matter what it takes, she will help her son.

---x---

Russia heard his doorbell ring and sighed. He was tired. He didn't want to answer it. "Ukraine! Make yourself useful and answer that!"

Russia heard Ukraine sigh and heard the sound of the door opening. There was light talking Russia wasn't focusing in on until Ukraine yelled out, "Russia, you приклад **(butt)**, someone wants to talk to you!"

"Что почему? **(What, why?)**"

"Just get up here and ask her yourself!"

Russia sighed, got up, and walked to the door. Russia pushed his brother away and paused when he saw France. Of all the countries in the world that could visit him, Russia didn't expect it to be her.

"Russia, I need to talk to you."

---x---

"Soooo, you want me to help you find out what's going on with America?" France had explained everything to Russia, though Russia had already suspected the same things she's suspecting. They both knew something incredibly is wrong with America and they only confirmed and added onto the other's suspicions.

France nodded, "Yes, I know it's a lot to ask of you but-"

"Sure, I'll help."

France looked up at Russia, surprised, "Really?!"

"Yep."

France smiled at that and almost hugged Russia, but decided better of it and shook Russia's hand ecstatically, "Thank you so much, Russia. I can't describe to you how much this means to me."

Russia nodded, but he had to ask something, "So, why am I your first option?"

France's face fell a little bit at that, "You know how America is.

You've fought him for how long? A long time. He's stubborn, reckless, and maybe a little bit too soft on the inside. He doesn't... act like this. As they say, keep your friends close and your enemies closer. If anyone truly knew how America acted, it'd be you. Plus, you were the one who heard him crying. You must've realized it then, right?"

She sighed, looked at the ground, and paused for a few seconds before continuing with what she was saying, "Plus, the others only see a perfect America that doesn't have big, personal problems. They see a superpower before they see just another person. Even my husband sometimes writes off his problems as something minor and unimportant."

"Why are you so different then?" Russia questioned, curious.

"He's my fils. I love him so much. I would notice something like this in a heartbeat. Plus, Amérique doesn't cry over small things... Whatever it is, it's something serious." She looked up at Russia, and he could see small tears forming in her eyes, "I don't want to do nothing while he's probably getting hurt. I don't want to stand there and watch while he's being hurt enough for him to cry...

"All I want is for him to be alright, and I believe you can help me figure out how we can help him."

Russia was silent at that. After what she said set in, Russia smiled.

"Well then, let's find out what the American is hiding."

France is best mom. I think I made her too caring but that's ok, we all need caring moms.

Russia and France are the dream team (not in a shipping way pls no). They're like Scooby-Doo, except only two members.

Also, the next chapter may take a little longer cause I'm accidentally making it 10x longer than what it needs to be oops-

Tschüss!

-Selva

Ch 10: All Your Fault // The Pain of the Past and Present

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America opened his eyes to the crispness of the night. He was in a clearing, and the moon was a mere crescent, glowing with light. America looked up at the sky and saw how the stars twinkled the same way they did oh so long ago. He felt a pang in his heart as he realized that he was back to a time where things had been a lot simpler. America couldn't say he knew the exact year it was but he knew that it most definitely wasn't modern times. In the distance, he could see the twinkling of fire. It looked... large. Even from where America was, he could tell that fire was way too big to be a normal campfire or something.

With fear pushing him onward, America ran towards the fire. He didn't know why, it was like the memory he was experiencing was pushing him to do so, to live out the memory in its entirety. America slowed down as he came to what was burning and could finally see the scene with clarity. It was the white house, burning, and two people America knew very well were right in front of it, staring at what they had done.

America suddenly knew what year it was. It was 1814, and America knew what was happening. One of the two people turned around, it was Canada. Even though Canada had an older flag, America could recognize his brother anywhere. Canada glared at America, his eyes filled with immeasurable anger and the words "I hate you" no doubt on Canada's lips. America felt the guilt inside him swell up as he finally noticed the bundles of emotion that were encased in Canada's eyes. America could see anger, hatred, disappointment... and sadness. An emotion America hadn't ever noticed whenever he looked back on this specific memory. America remembered being so filled with anger on that day that he had forgotten who had betrayed who first.

Canada, without a single word being said, turned and walked away.

Once he had left, the other familiar figure, Britain, turned and glanced at America. Britain looked at his son for a few seconds before shaking his head and walking away, eventually catching up with his other son.

America was left there to stare at the burning White House, guilt swallowing up the last bit of happiness America gained from staring at the sky.

America looked at the sky again, noticing that the stars were dimmer and less sparkly than before. America sighed, and closed his eyes, hoping with all his might that he could just wake up.

... But nothing goes America's way anymore

Instead of waking up, America was instead plunged into a world of fear and pain, like every other nightmare he had.

*The moon was crying, the clearing was cold, and the stars were gone, their faint lights no longer twinkling in the night sky. It was modern times. Or, a very brash assumption of modern times. America started to hear the voice whispering in his ear, "**What do you gain by resisting me, hmm? You gain nothing but this pain. Granted, I made sure today's memory wasn't that bad, but you get the point.** **I'm** **the one in control here, not you."***

"Why are you doing this?" America asked, his voice weary and tired.

*"**... I've come to take back** **my** **freedom, America. The freedom you took from me so long ago. I'm going to write my own destiny, and the only way I can do that is by ending yours. No hard feelings, pops, it's just business."***

'Pops...?' America thought, 'Does that mean the one behind this is one of the states? But they would never-'

*America's thoughts were interrupted with an annoyed sigh. "**You can never pay attention, can you? Ugh, now I finally understand how so many other countries feel when you constantly space out on them.***

*"**... I'm sick of waiting. I've been waiting for how long and I'm wasting my time by talking to you? Time to get back to work."***

"Wait- what does that mean-"

The world around America shifted and changed to an old town. And by "old," America just means it looks like something from the nineteenth century. Is this another 1812 memory? Oh no. Now America recognized the town. It was York, Canada's capital during the war of 1812.

America looked around and saw some of his soldiers lighting fire to various buildings. America searched around desperately for Canada, hoping that he wouldn't have to confront his brother here. America was searching when he heard yelling in the square. America went over to the square to figure out what was going on, only to curse when he arrived there.

Canada was near the middle of the clearing, a rifle in his hands and a scary look in his eyes. When America went into the square, several soldiers turned their heads to look at him, leading Canada to look over to where he was as well. Well, this isn't good.

Canada and America's eyes met and Canada immediately looked enraged and aimed his rifle at America. So that's what's gonna happen. His brother is gonna kill him. 'Thanks a lot, voice.' America thought to himself. Canada started to pull the trigger, hate in his eyes. This was gonna hurt.

But Canada hesitated, *uncertainty in his eyes. He* hesitated. *And even though it was only a moment of hesitation, America heard a* "bang!"

But it wasn't from Canada's rifle.

America saw Canada gasp in pain and drop his rifle, his hands flying to his gut. America was shocked, terrified, and couldn't help feeling as though this was his fault. He ran to Canada, stumbling a bit from the shock of the moment.

*America reached Canada and saw a lot of blood staining Canada's clothes, "Canada I-" America was panicking. He looked around to bandages, really anything to cover the wound until America thought, 'F*ck it' and took off his coat, using it to cover Canada's bullet wound. "It's gonna be ok, Can, it's gonna be ok, you're fine, you're fine-"*

"Why?" America heard Canada's weak voice and looked at his brother. Canada's face was no longer filled with hatred, but with confusion. "Why are you helping me I thought-" Canada heaved for air, "I thought you hated me."

"Shhh, I don't hate you- how could I ever bring myself to hate my brother? And please, don't speak, you have to save your energy." America felt tears rushing down his cheeks but he didn't care. He had to save his brother. This was his only priority.

Canada chuckled, wincing at the pain, "I love you too, brother. I couldn't bring myself to-"

"Shh, please don't talk. I know, I know," Tears still fell down America's cheeks. Canada smiled weakly at America and his eyes started closing. America panicked, "Hey, stay with me, Can. Stay with me, please..." America turned to the soldiers around him and yelled, "DO SOMETHING! GET HELP!"

Canada opened his eyes a little bit and smiled a little bit wider, "I'm sorry, America..."

America turned to Canada and watched as his eyes grew unfocused. "No no no not yet, you gotta stay with me a little longer-"

Canada's hands, which were grasping his wound, went limp and his eyes glazed over. "No no no nonononono! Can, please! Open your eyes!" America was sobbing at this point, "Can! No, please! Come back! Please...! Please... open your eyes..." America broke down, holding his brother's body while bawling his eyes out. He barely noticed how the world around him blurred away, and he was back in the cold, harsh clearing, dust on his hands and arms.

"Did you like that, America?"

America winced at the familiar voice. He wanted this to end. "Please... stop."

"Ooo, now America begs for mercy?"** The voice laughed maniacally. **"You shouldn't have defied me in the first place, you should've known I can do more than show memories. I have one more

memory for you, America. And I'm sure you'll* love *it."

America was silent and didn't respond, which earned him a chuckle from the voice. Once again, the world around America twisted and changed. America was walking somewhere, but he didn't know where, and he wasn't quite sure he cared anymore. He was wearing an army uniform, but it was definitely an older version of America's uniform. America didn't know 100%, but he guessed World War II era.

*World War II era... oh f*ck.*

America immediately looked around, trying to find any sign of what time it was or what day it was. America first looked at where the sun was. It was low in the sky so it was either early in the morning or late afternoon. Next, he looked for signs of where he was. He started jogging around, looking for any sign of where he was this time- until he reached it. It was a military base. America knew its name the moment he laid eyes on it.

Pearl Harbor.

That's when it started. America subconsciously ducked when he heard a loud ***boom****! It had begun. America didn't want to be here, he knew what would happen- And yet his feet pulled him forward to help those around him, bark out orders, and whatnot. This distracted him in a way, but he still felt horrible whenever he saw anybody lying on the ground. Though it wasn't confirmed, America had a feeling they were dead...* Just like Canada was...

He felt guilt every time he saw a body, but he pushed those feelings away. He didn't want to deal with guilt today. He had to save the people around him. Even though this was just a memory, it helped him feel better about himself, even if it was just for a second. As he was helping a soldier get up and run away, he heard a loud boom to his right.

America looked to his right to see a ship starting to sink. He didn't have much time. Though his clothes quickly became covered as the buildings around him got bombed, some even collapsing, he hurried over to the docks, stopping to help people on the way. By the time he got to the harbor, four battleships had sunk or were sinking and four others were heavily damaged.

America could only watch helplessly as the final ship of the four sunk, distant voices from the ship screaming for help that would never come. America felt guilt, anger, and sadness consume him like a wave. He knew what would happen next. He remembered this day like the back of his hand, but he never remembered it in this agonizing detail. He never had a choice in his normal memories, but he did here. It felt as though all these events were truly happening all over again and that fact filled America both with sorrow and with fear. America heard the voice he knew he would hear scowling at him, the Japanese accent clear.

"Do you like what I've done?"

America turned around to look at Japan, or to be more accurate, the Japanese Empire. The Japanese country looked threateningly at America, his eyes sparkling with triumph. "No response? What? Are you shocked?" -Japan smirked to himself- "You should've seen this coming, America. If you refuse to give me what I want... I'll take it."

"Why? Why have you done this?!" America exclaimed. He felt tears prick his eyes but he quickly shook them away. He couldn't look weak. Not here. He needed to be strong and prove to the voice he wasn't weak. This is a memory... Nothing is real. Even though everything looked and felt so *real.*

"Why?" Japan chuckled, "I already said why."

"You didn't have to go this far to prove a point!"

"But of course you'd say that, American. The country who sits by the sidelines and is perfectly content with watching your family get killed by my allies? Though you've been in wars, you do not seem to know *wars. Sure, I didn't have to go this far, but I wanted to cripple your navy- maybe some people along with it, smartass. Proving a point was just a bonus."*

America shook his head, but couldn't find the right words to respond to Japan in time.

"The American no longer has a retort to say, hmm?"

"You bastard! You truly are evil!"

Japan started laughing hysterically, "That's all *you came up with?!" America shrunk back as he remembered what will happen next. "You stupid Americans. There is no 'good' or 'evil' in war. Only 'crazy' and 'insane.'" Japan stopped laughing as an idea popped into his head, his smirk only growing wider. "Maybe I need to give you a reminder of that."*

America stumbled back and Japan threateningly approached. He remembered what will happen next. No, no, no, no! Not this! Anything but this! America could've sworn he heard the voice chuckling at his helplessness. Japan took out a dagger and lunged towards America.

America couldn't stop the knife before the knife sliced over his right eye. America immediately closed his left eye and stumbled back due to the pain, giving Japan the chance to lunge again. Japan aimed for his eyes again, and hit his target, slicing over America's right eye again. America cried out in pain and pushed Japan away, desperate to stop the Japanese man.

Japan stumbled backward a bit and laughed, "I expected more of a struggle from you other than a weak push, American." The sound of footsteps echoed behind America and Japan looked towards the direction of the noise, frowning the slightest bit. "You know what, I'll let you be for now. I want to drag this out. Be prepared, American, because next time I'll aim for more than just your eyes."

As Japan walked away, the world started to get swallowed by the harsh clearing. The final thing to get swallowed by the darkness was Japan, who had turned around to smirk at America.

America got up, a variety of emotions swelling through him. But one emotion triumphed over the others. Anger. America was done with this. He had to see his friends die, now his family?! Now some of his most traumatizing moments?! He was done with this voice, whoever they were, and decided he'd try doing something he hadn't done in forever.

#&@%(&^$%@&%^(&@%^*

America was in an all too familiar place. He was in front of a mansion. It was normally colorful and filled with life, but now its presence hung eerily in the air. America went up to the door of the mansion and

knocked, a bit nervous.

A few muffled noises were heard from the inside, but they quickly silenced as someone opened the door. It was Texas. He looked around, suspicious, until he saw America. He suddenly looked confused, "America? What are you doing here?"

America was about to respond, but he heard a crash come from the inside of the mansion and saw a very short state run underneath Texas and jump on America, "Dad!" She exclaimed, hugging America.

"Rhode Island? What's going on? Why is it so... lifeless here?"

The short state, Rhode Island, simply frowned and stopped hugging America. "He's bac-"

Her mouth was quickly covered by another state, Delaware. Delaware whispered something into her ear and uncovered her mouth.

Rhode Island looked surprised, to say the least. She looked back up at her dad and seemed to notice something behind America. Her eyes widened in... fear? She squeaked and bolted back into the mansion with Delaware following her to make sure she's safe.

America looked behind him to see nothing. What was Rhode Island so afraid of? America turned to Texas and asked, "What's going on? Why was Rhode Island so scared a moment ago?"

Texas opened his mouth to answer the question, but also glanced back over America's shoulders, looking at something behind America. He hesitated and sighed, "We'll talk- I just need to do something first." He glanced over America's shoulders, and then looked straight at America, his eyes showing an extreme sense of seriousness, "Stay there. Please. I can't explain why, but you can't come inside, ok?"

"Why not?" America asked, confused.

"Please, trust me, pops."

America froze at that. Pops? Where had he heard that before? America watched as Texas closed the door and walked away while he was contemplating where he had heard pops before. It finally dawned on

America.

The voice.

The voice called America pops.

Texas...?

No, but Texas would never-

...

Would he?

America's thoughts were interrupted as Texas came outside to talk, closing and locking the door to the mansion behind him, certain female state following him.

"Hey, dad..." The female state, California, said. She looked tired and weary, almost as though she had been fighting with something or someone... *Only then did America realize that both Texas and California looked incredibly tired. California looked more tired than Texas, however.*

"What's going on? Why do you two look so tired?"

California weakly smiled, about to say something, but Texas responded for her, "For one, We've been fighting someone for you. You're welcome."

"Fighting someone?" America asked, confused

California butted in, obviously irritated by Texas interrupting her. "Yes, we've been fighting our brother, if you could call him that. It's weird if you think about it too hard..."

Texas sighed, "Don't complicate things. This is ten times weirder for me than for you."

California snorted at that, "It would be, wouldn't it?"

America interrupted their conversation, "But who? It's one of the states, right?"

California looked alarmed at that, "No- I-" She looked desperately at Texas, "No one has given in, right?"

"No one... yet," Texas responded.

California hit him on the shoulder, "Don't you dare doubt our siblings!"

"Our adopted *siblings."*

That comment didn't seem to sit well with California but before she could say something, a tremor shook the ground, almost like an earthquake but it only lasted for a few seconds. A horrifying scream could be heard coming from the house, breaking the eerie silence that had started to settle in the air. America recognized that scream. He had heard it around eighty years ago, right after a memory he just experienced.

Hawaii.

Without thinking, America ran up to the door, only to find it locked. Texas pushed past him, unlocked the door, and ran inside with California. America wanted to join them but what Texas said earlier lingered in his mind. Why wasn't he allowed to enter the house? He had entered it multiple times before.

America heard the agonizing shriek again, and his fatherly instincts kicked in, making him bolt inside to the source of the scream. He ran into the living room to find Hawaii in the middle of the room, curled up on the ground with every single American state, district, and territory around her, their expressions worried- some of them looked to be in pain too, but it was obviously less severe than Hawaii's. Texas looked behind him at America and a look of fear- something America had never seen Texas have- instantly descended on his face. He looked to the states and yelled out, "Everyone, especially Alaska and Hawaii, prepare yourselves!"

At the sound of his warning, the other states and territories braced themselves for what was to come. A huge tremor shook the ground- it seemed even bigger than before- and immediately America saw the looks of pain that dawned on everyone. For some, the pain looked way worse than others. America heard two screams this time: Hawaii's and

Alaska's. He immediately went to comfort his children; but when he got there, Hawaii opened her eyes and backed away from America, looking instead at something over his shoulders, fear in her gaze. She yelled out, "Get away from me!"

That spurred Texas to action. He got up, despite his pain, and practically shoved America outside of the mansion, sympathy flashing in his eyes, "You need to go, America, before he causes more damage."

"Who is he?" America asked desperately.

Texas frowned, "Even if I tried to tell you, It'd make no difference. If I tried to tell you who he is, he'll retaliate. I'm sorry, pops, but you need to figure out yourself. I can't risk Hawaii dying.

"I'm sorry." Texas closed the door on America, leaving him standing there, confused.

The scene quickly changed back into the harsh meadow.

America felt peeved. Whoever the voice was, he was hurting his family- he was killing Hawaii! He didn't care if the voice was one of the states anymore. He was ready to confront the voice once and for all, "I don't care *who you are anymore, but you better stop hurting my family. I won't stop until-"*

"You won't stop until what? You die? Pfft, I'd love to see that happen. Unfortunately for you, I have a revenge plan. You wanna know why Texas and the others were in pain when you entered the mansion?"

"..."

"Oh, so you choose to be silent now? Haha, nice one. It's because you entered the mansion when they told you not to. I'm connected to you, America. And what you just did is let me into their nice little home. I haven't been able to get inside that house no matter how hard I try- they defy me too much. But what did you do? You gave me free access to their home! And to Rhode Island."

America's heart sank. "Rhode Island...? What are you going to do to her?"

"Make her life hell. I remember her from so long ago. So tiny yet so defiant. She'll be fun to* break. *And guess what? This is all your fault.* You *were the one who let me in their house.* You *were the one who let me spread my influence to Rhode Island.* You *were the one who caused your children pain.* You *were the one who caused this* all . *Nice going, America."

America felt guilt hit him like a train. He caused all of this...? No, he- he didn't... Did he? Maybe if he wasn't so weak he wouldn't be hurting those around him. America no longer heard the voice other than its voice echoing throughout the void. He could only assume it left him to drown away in guilty pain.

And drown away he did.

--~--

...

Ok, this chapter was fun. 3800 words? Let's go.

It was my birthday a few days ago, so I made this long boi chapter to celebrate because I had so many ideas.

For Clarification: Some of America's states are adopted (the ones that were countries before they were states or belonged to another country; for example, Texas, California, Hawaii, Alaska, etc.), but they all still call him dad. And, the voice doesn't just play memories, the voice can also manipulate memories due to reasons that will be explained... someday.

Anywho, Russia was supposed to be in this chapter but I got way into traumatized America and co. I'm not sure what this says about me, considering this chapter was originally supposed to be happy but *whatever* -

Happiness? Pfft, don't need that here

Tschüss!

-Selva

P.S. Have you caught onto who is the voice yet?

Ch 11: Lashing Out // The Attempts at Finding Answers

[image]

America opened his eyes. It was Tuesday. He turned his head to look at the clock. It was 10:12 am. The meeting started twelve minutes ago. Even so, America found he didn't care as much as yesterday. The voice's words still echoed in his head, criticizing him and calling him useless. He was too tired and heartbroken to fight back, so he just listened to it. Time dragged on, and at some point, America closed his eyes. When his eyes were closed for too long, the traumatizing sight of his brother dying from the dream started to show up. America decided he won't do that again.

Eventually, he got ready for the meeting he was already an hour late for, not caring about the meeting but going to it to pull off the act that he was ok. He decided to walk instead of drive to the meeting to think.

And, to regret.

--x--

America barged open the door, causing everyone's heads to quickly turn to him. Well, except for an angry UN. UN knew, through a check of attendance, that it was America at the door. "Well," UN said, sighing in exasperation, "Why are you almost two hours late, America?"

America put on a cocky expression, "Well you can't blame me if it took me forty minutes to get here."

UN sighed, "The drive is only twelve minutes, America-"

"But the walk is forty." America interrupted, which no doubt would've frustrated UN if America hadn't said that he *walked* to the meeting.

UN looked surprised and finally started looking at America, "Walk?"

"Yep. Walk."

"Why did you walk here?" UN asked, still confused.

"I needed to clear my head," America replied.

UN sighed heavily, "America, don't walk here when you're already an hour late, we have cars for a reason. I'm going to move on for the sake of the *meeting.* But, I'd like to talk to you afterwards."

America put on a fake smirk while walking to his seat and joked, "Got it, teach."

UN sighed and continued to talk about various issues the countries of the world needed to address. This time, America didn't fall asleep, but he still wasn't paying attention. All he could think about was the states and... Canada. There were several times during the meeting where America glanced to the seat right of his, Canada's seat, just to make sure Canada was *there, alive*. America knew deep down that the dream wasn't real; but, it had really shaken him, especially because he never had that pain of losing actual family before. It was, honestly, more than what he could bare.

After a few hours of spacing out, the meeting ended and America dragged himself over to where UN stood, looking over some papers. "So, what's up?" America asked in the calmest voice he could muster.

UN stopped what he was doing and looked straight at America. Oh, this was serious.

And America was terrified.

UN started speaking, "So, America, I know that something's going on with you. Though most are overlooking this, I know you at least have the decency to stay awake and pay attention to meetings- even though you are occasionally late. I notice these things. You care, well, *cared* about these meetings. What's the problem? What's so big that it's distracting you from my meetings?"

America's heart dropped in his chest. Oh no no no no no, he did not want to deal with this question today. He planned to go home and possibly cry for a few hours, not bother others with his sob story and his problems. America tried his best to plaster on the most genuine smile he has ever made, "Nothing much. Just some bothering protests, that's all."

UN raised an eyebrow, "Protests? I'm sure I would've heard of those- *and yet I haven't.*"

America had to think quickly. Something to distract UN, something to distract UN- aha! "Ok, ok, it's updog." America blurted out.

Give the poor American a break, it's the best he can do on the spot.

UN pressed, "Stop dodging the question, America."

'Dang it, he knows about Updog,' America thought.

"What is wrong? I'm sure I could help-"

America snapped, his fake smile disappearing from his face, "No. No, you can't. You can't fix something like this. You can't just plaster flex tape on it and expect things to be ok! UN, you don't have the slightest idea of what I'm going through. Heck, you don't even know what it's like to feel split at the seams- twice! You don't know what it's like to see your children hurt-"

UN raised his eyebrow at that, completely unfazed by America's outburst and instead focusing on something specific America said. Children? Does America even have children? UN was pretty sure America didn't have children. I guess this means it's time for UN to check the records. Again.

America had stopped talking, realizing what he just said. He calmed down and once again faked a smile, "Nothing is wrong with me, I'm just a bit distracted. Just... leave me be, ok?" With that, America started walking away.

"Wait!" UN called out, but America had already walked straight out of the room. There's no way that outburst was nothing.

"Do you believe me now? Something is wrong with America," UN jumped at the sound of the familiar voice and turned to see Russia looking at where America had been a few moments ago. So it was Russia who nearly gave UN a heart attack.

"You were listening to our conversation?"

"It isn't that hard to do when America's yelling his heart out."

UN sat down on a chair next to him, "Yeah, something is definitely wrong, but he won't admit *what*." He paused, and then looked at Russia, "Why do you care so much anyway? I thought you two hate each other."

"Hated. We agreed to start fresh yesterday."

UN looked up in surprise, "Really?" UN smiled wide, "That's great! I'm glad you two have made up! I'm so proud-" UN suddenly cut himself off and cleared his throat, a little embarrassed, "Anyway, back to the topic at hand. I know this is a bit much to ask, but could you help me figure out what's wrong with him?"

Russia snorted, choosing not to address UN's proud parent moment. "You sound just like France."

"I sound... just like France?"

"Yeah, she asked me the same thing yesterday."

UN nodded, "Then how about this- me, you, and France all work together to figure out what's wrong with America. I know it may sound a bit extreme, but America could be hiding something big."

"Wow, are you France in disguise or something?" Russia muttered under his breath.

"What did you say?" UN asked, looking straight at Russia.

"Nothing."

UN gave Russia a questioning look before shaking his head, "Better not be pulling an America on me."

"I'm not," Russia stated, chuckling lightly. "Well then, a bigger team has been formed. I'll have to tell France that you're helping us."

UN nodded, "Of course, go ahead and do that."

Russia got up, waved a small goodbye, and went off to tell France.

UN nodded and waved back before looking back at his papers, pen in hand, wondering what the heck was going on inside of America's head.

--x--

Russia had just told France about UN's involvement in their investigation- if you could even call it that- and was now heading back to his apartment when an idea struck him. Why not check up on America now? It's not like anything's barring him from going, except maybe America himself. Either way, Russia had already made up his mind. He was going to America's apartment. It might not be the greatest idea, but Russia kind of wanted to check up on the American.

Russia knew none of this was his business- especially because they had been enemies simply a few days before- but he wanted to change things. Why? Uh ... So that his siblings would stop leaving him, of course! It may be a selfish reason, sure, but proving to his siblings that he could change too may improve their increasingly negative relationships; and, America just happened to be the easiest way to do just that. There was no other reason. Nope, none at all.

If Russia became "friends" with their father's greatest enemy, then he would prove Estonia wrong- I mean- prove to his siblings that he was capable of change. That he wasn't a lost cause.

He didn't want to lose any more of his siblings.

Russia knocked on the door, nervous but determined to achieve his admittedly selfish goals. He waited a bit, and the door eventually opened to reveal a tired American.

"Hey, what's u-" America started. When he realized the person at the door was Russia, America paused for a bit, and his eyes narrowed at

Russia. "What are you doing here?"

Russia smirked slightly and replied, "To talk. We did agree to start over."

America looked conflicted for a moment, before he smiled and opened the door, saying, "Well, come on in then! It's a bit messy, but that's all."

The apartment wasn't messy, in fact, it was incredibly clean. Russia noted that all the glass shards- all of them this time- were cleaned up. Russia looked around and noticed something... off. That was the only thing that had changed about the room. The rest of the room was the exact same. It was unnaturally clean, and let's just say America is not a very clean person. Heck, even the bed barely looked used.

Russia took note of this and sat on the couch. America still stood by the door, leaning against it. He looked like he was in deep thought, but his face remained expressionless.

"Are you going to stay there or are you going to come and join me?" Russia asked.

The question seemed to shock America out of whatever he was thinking about because America's head suddenly jerked up towards Russia. America looked at Russia for a second, emotionless, before a smile took up his face. "Of course I'll join you," America walked over to Russia and sat down on the other side of the couch. And with that, they started talking about all sorts of things.

--x--

About an hour had passed and they were already acting like old friends. I guess the friendship formed through being war buddies never dies. Speaking of which...

I guess that's how their conversation quickly turned to this.

...

America paused before he started to speak, his words suddenly

shaky, "Do you remember World War II? I know you were alive then, you were always with Soviet, following him around. I remember you weren't a kid, either, so surely you remember the war?"

Russia was a bit taken aback by this question. He had been around 16 when the war started, and 18 when America joined the war. But, why would America suddenly start talking about this subject, of all things?

"Yeah, I remember it." Russia responded vaguely, "What about the war?"

America nervously fiddled with his gloves, making sure they were staying on. "Do you ever feel... guilty? For what happened?"

Russia was a little... surprised, to say the least. Would he get answers from the American so soon? Was this the reason he's been so weird for the past few days? Would this investigation that he and France started be cut short? "Guilty for what?" Russia questioned, listening intently for America's answer but acting like he didn't care. Bad move.

America frowned slightly, briskly standing up, "Nothing. It's... nothing. Forget I ever said anything."

But Russia wouldn't take "nothing" for an answer. He was so close to a real, *definite* answer to this headache of an experience. Russia got up and quickly grabbed a hold of America's hand, "What's going on America? You seem off. Don't worry, you can tell me." Russia didn't understand why he was being so nice to America but... he just *was*.

America freaked out. He quickly jerked his hand back, his expression a mixture of fear and surprise. America let out a few shaky breaths before saying sternly, "*Nothing* is wrong, I'm fine."

"Well, it sure doesn't seem like it."

"Stop butting into my business, Russia!" America snapped. He was becoming increasingly frustrated with the Russian in front of him. "I'm fine, there's nothing wrong!"

"That's a lie and you know it," Russia said, his voice low and intimidating. Though he didn't want to admit it, he felt... concerned for the American. Russia started thinking about what America had said just a few moments earlier. Guilt? The war? *Wait*, surely he couldn't be- surely he isn't going to end up like-

America's bitter voice disrupted Russia's thoughts, "Yeah, you *would* know a thing or two about lies, wouldn't you, Russia? After all, you learned from the best."

"Don't you *dare* bring him into this!" Russia growled back, any concern for the American quickly fading away at the cruel mention towards his father. Russia's face contorted with anger and he took a threatening step towards the American.

"... Watch me."

Russia went up to America and grabbed him by his collar, about to yell something in America's face when something stopped him. Russia let America go, his anger slowly ebbing away.

"... When you're ready to talk to me about your problems without pushing me away or lashing out, come find me."

America could only watch as Russia walked away, guilt building up inside him once again.

Well, that was one rollercoaster ride after another.

The song really only fits in one section of the chapter, but I'm a sucker for Neovaii's songs so it's there anyway-

PLUS, I dunno about you, but I really like writing about America in pain. It's just so fun to mess around with how people lash out when they're scared or hurt.

Tschüss!

-Selva

Ch 12: A Changed American // The New Friendship

[image]

America flinched when the door slammed. The harsh sound followed by utter silence gave America a bad feeling and he didn't like it.

Stressed, America went into the bathroom to check on his cracks. Their growth seems to have slowed down, probably because of the state's efforts to fight back against this mysterious figure that America apparently will never know the name of. America's eyes, however, had already gone completely black, a sign of his instability. America noted how lucky he was that he already wore glasses practically every day.

America sighed and looked at himself in the mirror.

"Useless."

"Disgusting."

"Weak."

The voice repeated, over and over again, it won't stop, *it won't ever stop-*

America felt a jumble of feelings overwhelm him: Fear, guilt, sadness, anger, and... happiness? Where was this happiness coming from? America closed his eyes and tried to tune in on that distant scrap of happiness. America felt a familiar presence.

Rhode Island.

America couldn't stop the tears from flowing out of his eyes. He knew Rhode Island wouldn't be happy for much longer. He let the voice reach her. He gave the voice access to her mind. He doomed

Rhode Island, his daughter.

'I'm such a terrible father,' America thought, hopefully to himself. He led Rhode Island to her doom all because he wasn't careful.

All because he was useless in trying to help her.

America felt the voice creep into his mind, whispering such awful things in the American's ear. For once, what the voice was saying felt so *right*. America could only watch his tears fall to the floor and hear the voice whispering in his ear.

Suddenly, what Russia said popped in America's mind: "... When you're ready to talk to me about your problems without pushing me away or lashing out, come find me."

America heard that message repeating in his mind. He wasn't ready to talk about his problems. Bringing up World War II previously had been a mistake. He didn't want to drag Russia, a guy he barely knows, into his problems. The voice is right. He's worthless, so why bother. It won't matter anyway. Even so, America knew one thing: He's ready to say sorry.

With that goal in mind, America quickly washed his face, hid his eyes with his glasses, made sure he had his gloves on, grabbed his room key, and exited the room, ready to venture outside. America walked over to Russia's hotel room and braced himself for the possibly bitter social exchange ahead. America took in a shaky breath and nervously knocked on the door.

The few moments of silence after that was terrifying, but America soon heard rustling and a few muffled bad words in Russian. It took a few seconds, but the door opened. Russia was the one who answered. He looked down at the shorter America in front of him, sighed, and closed the door.

Or, well, would've closed the door. Unfortunately for Russia, America's hand got in the way.

"Please, I understand if you're mad at me right now but I..." America trailed off nervously. Russia grumbled a bit and opened the door

wider. America continued with what he was saying, pretending that he was confident, "I wanted to apologize. I shouldn't have snapped at you. I shouldn't have said what I said. I know your father's a sensitive subject for you, and I'm sorry. I pushed buttons that should never be pushed. I was stressed and worried, and I lashed out when you were only worried about me."

Russia's eyes widened. America was apologizing so soon? What the heck is up with him? Normally, America is frustratingly stubborn when it comes to things like this- he would never apologize over an argument with Russia. period. And now he's just... not stubborn. It's actually kind of a refreshing change.

America fidgeted a bit, and held his hand out, "So, do you accept my apology, good sir?"

Russia chuckled, maybe America isn't so bad after all. Whatever happened, changed America. Russia knew he should be concerned, but he kind of liked this new America. "I do accept your apology," Russia responded, reaching out and shaking America's hand jokingly, smiling all the while.

America smiled widely at Russia, maybe things would turn out ok.

"Well, that's something I never expected to see in my life."

America and Russia both jumped at the voice, turning towards its origin.

"Why are you both looking at me like I busted your cover?" Ukraine asked.

"Oh, thank goodness it's just you, Ukraine," America sighed, a look of relief forming on his face.

"Just me? What does that mean?" Ukraine asked, his eyebrows raised suggestively.

"It means you're not one of the worst assholes," Russia commented, ignoring Ukraine's look.

Ukraine's face quickly morphed to one that almost looked offended,

"Of course you'd say that- because you're the worst asshole!"

And it degenerated from there. America could only watch as insult after insult was flung between them. Though they were siblings, America noted that it looks as though they absolutely hate each other. Wait, no, they look like siblings. After a few minutes of heated insults, America started getting a little ticked off. Eventually, he had enough.

"Both of you better calm the flying fuck down or so help me!"

They both looked at America, looked at each other, and seemed to reach a quiet conclusion. Ukraine crossed his arms and walked inside of their apartment while Russia watched him walk away.

Russia sighed and turned to America, "Sorry about that, we-"

America interrupted him, "No, no, I understand. Siblings."

Russia faintly smiled, "As an apology, would you like to talk inside the room rather than out here?"

America raised an eyebrow, "I thought I was the one apologizing here."

"I thought I already forgave you."

"Well then, I forgive you back."

Russia looked at America, confused. America noticed his look and stated, "You forgave me, so I forgive you back. You really don't have to spend time with me, I know you don't exactly like me."

Russia sighed, "What did we say about starting over? I don't hate you, Америка."

America weakly smiled, "That still doesn't mean you have to spend time with me, Russia. It's not like we're friends or anything."

Russia paused, there was America's signature stubbornness. Unfortunately, Russia is stubborn, too. He wasn't going to lose... whatever this is. "Then we're friends now. Come inside and sit your

butt down so that we can talk."

America was about to retort something back until what Russia said registered in his brain. He froze. They're friends now? Um... ok? America wasn't expecting this. Back in the day (Literally a week ago, Ame.), America knew that they probably would've argued about something incredibly stupid by now, but for once, America's brain couldn't make up any comebacks. In fact, America felt kind of happy. He's become friends with his enemy. Though it probably wasn't a real friendship, America liked to think he made up with a man he thought he'd never have a friendly conversation with.

Because maybe this means he isn't bad at everything after all.

--x--

America and Russia had been talking for a while and they haven't had a serious argument yet.

Admittedly, they haven't agreed on everything together, but they were actually having a nice conversation. Russia noticed, however, that America didn't bring up what they were talking about earlier. To be honest, Russia didn't really want to continue that conversation. He wanted to give America a chance. Plus, Russia didn't feel like pushing America into an answer. He wanted to keep this conversation nice while it lasted. It was the first time in a long time that he was having a nice conversation with anyone other than his siblings and BRICS. Well, obviously he and his siblings fight but they tolerate him, probably. Russia wasn't sure. Heck, Russia's not even sure if they even like him anymore.

Ukraine's trying to distance himself from the family, Russia heard it was something about EU and maple leaf dude, whatever his name was. Estonia's already distanced herself by a lot, apparently. Russia didn't even know she liked someone until this week. Russia could start listing his siblings off and what they're doing, but for the most part, Russia has no idea. That thought saddened him.

"Ruuuussia, are you dead?" America's voice seemed to snap Russia out of his thoughts.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Америка. I spaced out."

America simply smiled, "That's ok, Russia. I don't mind."

"Well, that's strange," Russia commented.

America raised an eyebrow, "What's strange?"

"You're fine with me spacing out. Normally, you'd be frustrated or irritated at me."

America chuckled, "Really?... Now that you mention it, I guess I did do that..." America frowned slightly.

"You did, a lot. I'm surprised, Америка, how come you've changed?"

"I've changed?" America started getting nervous, does Russia know about his other big change? But that wouldn't make sense because if Russia knew, wouldn't he have told UN or literally anyone else by now?

"Yeah, you're less obnoxious- less extreme."

America's frown only grew. "I was... obnoxious?"

"Kind of."

America thought about what Russia revealed, 'Was I really obnoxious? Have I changed? I don't think so, but I might've.' America's mind started jumping to conclusions and solutions, but none of them seemed to make sense, frustrating America.

"That's because I'm the reason you've changed, America."

America froze. He looked around. He was still in the real world and Russia was looking at him with an expectant look in his eyes. Oh, America should continue their conversation, right... But America didn't know what to say, all he could think of was the voice. He wasn't even sure he could speak right now. America felt as though his throat was closing up. He felt clammy and nervous. America looked at his hand and saw it shaking.

"Are you afraid, America? Oh, don't tell me... you're afraid of me, aren't you?"

America could hear the echoing cackle of the voice's laugh. He *was* afraid of the voice, wasn't he? He didn't expect the voice to barge in like this when he was around other people. Heck, he wasn't expecting to be so very afraid of the voice. Only one thought echoed in America's mind: 'Don't let Russia know. Don't drag him into your problems.'

The voice is always listening, always watching.

And America can't stop it... or him, or her.

America felt two hands shaking his shoulder and snapped out of his daze. He looked up and saw Russia with a concerned face.

"Are you ok, Америка? You suddenly froze and started shaking."

America gulped and forced a smile, "I'm completely fine I just..." America looked around for any excuse and checked his phone, that's when America had an idea. America faked a shocked look, "Oh no no no no, I have somewhere I need to be! I have to go." America started rushing towards the door. Before he fully exited the apartment, he yelled out, "See you tomorrow, Russ!"

America immediately started speed walking away. He couldn't think, he couldn't breathe. There was only the voice. It was always there, it'll never leave- but America kept on walking or running. America couldn't tell anymore. He didn't quite know where he was running, but he wasn't quite sure he cared anymore. Anywhere is better than here. Anywhere is better than inside his own brain.

Eventually, America's feet led him to a park. America hadn't noticed how dark it had gotten. How long had he and Russia been talking? America looked around the park, there was a fountain in front of him and even though everywhere else it was brightly lit, the area near the fountain was dark in comparison. America sighed and sat down on the side of the fountain, collecting his thoughts. America noted how the voice had gotten eerily silent. Oh, something was going to happen.

Nevertheless, America was thankful he at least had a moment to think to himself.

"... You seriously think you can hide from me?"

There was the interruption of the silence America knew was going to happen. "I know I can't, voice. What should I call you, anyway? I can't just call you 'voice' the whole time, can I?"

"... Hm, good question for once. I suppose you can call me... CPR."

"Is that supposed to be a joke? I'm ninety percent sure if someone wasn't breathing in front of you, you'd never do CPR on them."

"It stands for something else, idiot. But, I guess I am doing CPR on someone."

America almost chuckled, but he knew better than to add fuel to the fire, "What's the name of this imaginary person?"

"Well, I'm doing CPR on myself."

America almost choked on air. CPR on yourself?! That's honestly one of the weirdest and stupid things America's ever heard.

"Ugh, you're insufferable. I'm bringing myself back to- Never mind. Since you're so entertained, you can figure it out on your own. ... What are you doing here, anyway? You could've gone back to our room."

"My room." America corrected.

"Our room. As much as your stupid brain doesn't like to admit it, I'm a part of you. Honestly, I'm not surprised you can't swallow that, You've never been one for accepting things as the way they are. Always spewing out your stupid 'freedom' everywhere even though people would be perfectly happy if you didn't interfere."

CPR paused a moment before asking, **"You're friends with that Russia guy now, yes?"**

America weakly nodded, afraid as to where this conversation was heading.

"Tell me, don't you think he'd be happier right now if you never interfered with his life?"

"What do you mean by that?" America could hear his voice shake.

America heard CPR laugh, **"If it weren't for you, Russia's dad would probably still be alive right now. Soviet was his name, yes? Hehe, think of how happy Russia would be right now if you hadn't interfered. He'd still have his dad, and would still be close with his siblings. You're the monster that made your new 'friend's' entire life fall apart. How do you feel, America? Are you happy with yourself?"**

"N-no, I- I did what I had to do." America stuttered.

"You could've let them live in peace. If you ask me, you should've been the one to fall, America.

"Because at least then I wouldn't be stuck babysitting a monster who lets little children out on the battlefield."

--x-- (we're going back in time now, btw)

"Are you ok, Америка? You suddenly froze and started shaking." Russia asked.

America smiled at Russia and yet if felt... fake somehow, "I'm completely fine I just..." America looked around until his eyes met his phone. America looked shocked, "Oh no no no no, I have somewhere I need to be! I have to go." America started rushing towards the door. Before he fully exited the apartment, he yelled out, "See you tomorrow, Russ!"

Russia was confusion. Why was America shaking just now and why did he leave immediately after? Something is wrong. Also, what's with that nickname? Russ. Russia's heart warmed up at that and he couldn't help but smile. Russia quickly coughed and pretended as though that nickname meant nothing to him. That was random. He was just overreacting.

When was the last time Russia had a nickname? Russia couldn't remember what the nickname was, he just remembered Belarus used to have a nickname for him when they were kids.

But Russia was more worried about America. He rushed out like there was no tomorrow. Russia's eyes widened, could that be the reason? Russia felt utterly terrified at the question that popped into his mind. Was America... dying?

...

No, that's ridiculous.

America's been going strong for what, 200+ years? He's not dying. There's no way. He won't die, he can't die.

Russia wasn't really sure why this was scaring and worrying him. He wasn't even sure why or when he started caring for the stupid American. He shouldn't care. Their friendship should be fake...

And yet it felt so real.

Russia heard a voice behind him. It was Ukraine's, "Are you finally gonna go searching for your boyfriend?"

Russia glared at Ukraine, "Friend. Not boyfriend."

"Didn't look that way in the hallway," Ukraine commented, smirking.

"So how's maple leaf?"

Ukraine was shut up by that, his face turning red. Almost as red as a maple leaf, actually. "We've- uh- actually gone on a date. He asked me out." Ukraine started smiling shyly.

Russia looked at Ukraine, shocked, "How come I wasn't told about this?"

"Because it isn't your business." Ukraine shot back, his smile quickly disappearing.

Russia smirked, "Is that why you're telling me now?"

Ukraine, who was beginning to get mad again, stormed off, saying, "Just go chase after your boyfriend,"

"Friend!" Russia corrected Ukraine.

"Это парень, и ты это знаешь!" **(It's boyfriend, and you know it!)** Ukraine called out.

"Я ненавижу тебя!" **(I hate you!)**

"Ha! You're not denying it!"

And with that, Russia could hear a door close.

Russia sighed, a little flustered. Why was he reacting like this to that one word? Russia was confused, he probably needed vodka. Being America's boyfriend... that's ridiculous. Russia shook his head at the thought and walked out of their hotel room. Or apartment. Russia was never sure what to call it. It was big, like a multi-room apartment, but it was located in a hotel. It's confusing.

Russia looked around the hallway, unsure of where America went. He didn't have America's number, so he couldn't ask America through text or anything. Even if he could ask, Russia doubted America would answer, due to the way he exited Russia's apartment... thing. So where would an upset American go?

Russia sighed and decided to check out the hotel lobby first. He went down to the lobby and, in the center, two female countries were talking, Albania and Greece. Russia went up to them and asked them if they had seen America pass through here and where he went. Greece smiled at Russia and happily answered his questions while Albania looked at Russia as if he'll start a fight.

Honestly, Russia doesn't blame her. Greece told Russia that she saw America walk through the lobby a few minutes ago and head outside. She didn't see where he went, but she claims he looked as though he was running away from something with his scared and unsure face. It was surely a sight to see, but Greece didn't look for long. She couldn't say she cared too much. For all she knew, an

angry country was following him being he said something wrong again.

Russia nodded, a worried look flashing on his face for a brief moment, and was about to leave when Albania commented, "He probably went to the park." She had a knowing look on her face now as if she knew that Russia wasn't following America to start a fight.

Russia paused and asked, "Why do you say that?"

Albania looked toward the entrance of the hotel, "Parks have always been good at clearing my mind, and America looked as though he had a lot to think about."

Russia nodded, "Thanks, Albania, Greece."

"Οποιαδήποτε στιγμή, Ρωσία!" **(Anytime, Russia!)**

Russia didn't entirely understand what Greece said, but smiled and nodded anyway. He then turned around and headed towards the park. He had seen it on Thursday when his car passed through here, so how hard can remembering where it is really be?

... Very hard, apparently.

Russia got lost multiple times before he reached the park. He had reached the park, but he still had no idea where America was. He searched around the park for a while until he saw a familiar figure by the fountain in the middle of the park.

Same glasses, same stupid gloves he started wearing all the time recently, same semi-slouched posture, yep, that's America. Russia went up to America and sat next to him, startling the shorter country.

"... How'd you know I was here?" America asked. Russia couldn't help but notice that it sounded like America had been crying. Russia felt an unusual pang in his heart at that.

Russia looked worriedly at America, "Were you crying just now?"

"..." No response.

"Please, answer me."

"..."

Russia sighed and grabbed America by the chin, forcing the American to look at Russia. He still had his glasses on so Russia couldn't see his eyes, but his cheeks glistened. He was most definitely crying, but Russia wanted to hear it from America. "Were you crying just now?"

"... So what if I was? Are you going to tell everyone how I'm weak and how I can't do anything right, including making sure you don't know I'm crying?" America shook off Russia's hand and looked down at the floor as if it was ten times more interesting than Russia.

"Now, why would I do that? We're friends, aren't we?" Russia smiled warmly at America. America looked up at Russia and looked confused.

"You were serious about that? We're real friends?"

Russia's smile only grew wider. Russia had to admit that somehow, America wasn't as bad as he used to. Maybe it was because Russia was finally giving the shorter country a chance. Or maybe it was because America changed due to whatever's going on with him. Or maybe, just maybe, Russia himself was the one who changed. However it all worked out, Russia found that his heart felt surprisingly content when he said something he never thought he'd say in a million years.

"Of course we're real friends, Америка."

Hello peoples!

I was off of Wifi for a few hours, so I'll have another chapter out really soon!

The next chapter will be based around Rhode Island, so be

ready for that!

Going to the story, Russia and America are finally real friends! Plus, Russia may be gaining some... extra feelings for America.

Also,

[image]

Tschüss!

-Selva

Ch 13: Rhode Island // The Call to Action

Rhode Island braced herself as the ground shook and pain coursed through her veins. She heard Hawaii scream again and almost cried at the horrid sound. Rhode Island hated seeing or hearing her siblings hurt.

'Think happy thoughts, think happy thoughts,' Rhode Island repeated in her head. Eventually, this method worked and Rhode Island started to think about a day oh so long ago. She could still remember it vividly.

~~-~~

Rhode Island looked at her siblings excitedly. Today was the day. The colonies and America had finally officially decided that they would be free from Britain, free to be themselves.

Massachusetts, the first of all of them to be settled, looked at the rest of the colonies, as well as America, and smiled, "We've done it, we'll be free once we win this war!"

Several colonies whooped and whistled loudly, Rhode Island being one of them. She could hear America chuckle in the corner. Rhode Island turned to America, ran up in front of him, and exclaimed, "America, we'll finally be free!"

America smiled, patting Rhode Island on the head, "Yes, we will."

Rhode Island thought about something for a second and then asked, "If you become a country and we become your states, does that make you our dad?"

Virginia choked on air at Rhode Island's question. New York was laughing his ass off. New Jersey glared at his sibling and elbowed him in

the side. That seemed to shut New York up.

Rhode Island became confused, "What's so funny?"

Virginia coughed and answered, "I mean, America's already our dad, in a way."

Rhode Island's smile only grew wider, "Really?"

"I mean, yeah. He helped to create all of us. I never saw the Brit as anything more than a hot-headed grandpa." Virginia responded, fiddling with something in his hand.

Rhode Island smiled and looked expectantly at New York and New Jersey, curious about their views on this. They used to be a part of Netherlands ' colony, after all, "What about the Netherlands for you guys? Would he be your dad instead of America?"

New York looked as though he was contemplating it for a moment, before he answered, "Netherlands is our dad, not gonna deny that, but America's like an adoptive father to us if that makes any sense." New Jersey nodded in agreement.

North Carolina grew impatient of their conversation and tapped his foot on the ground, "How long do we have left until we have to merge with America?"

Though the question wasn't directed at him, America responded, "Maybe about one hour until we have to unite."

It was eerily silent as that sentence dawned on everyone. One hour left of being in the real world. One hour left of interacting with someone other than each other. Possibly, one hour left of being alive. None of the states truly knew what was going to happen when they merged. They had heard stories from Britain, but they didn't necessarily trust the old man anymore. Plus, when Britain merged it was originally only three countries merging. The colonies and America were fourteen people merging- they could die when they merged.

North Carolina got up quickly, his expression sour, "Then let's go."

"Go where?" South Carolina asked, her head turning to her brother.

"Anywhere. I don't care. I'm going to go be free in the real world while I still can." With that, North Carolina left the room they were in. America winced when the door was slammed shut. North Carolina was most definitely not happy about this, not like he could be blamed for not wanting to die.

South Carolina smiled weakly at America, "He's just being moody. I'll make sure he doesn't do anything stupid before we have to unite." She got up to chase after North Carolina. She cast out a sidelong glance at America before she left the room, her eyes flashing with worry.

Rhode Island followed South Carolina's gaze and noticed how that exchange left America with a sad look on his face; so, she went up to him, smiling. She sat next to her father and said, "I'm ready, dad! I trust you."

America hesitated before smiling back at Rhode Island and patting her on the head, "I'll do my best, Rhode Island."

--x--

May 1790.

Rhode Island was finally a state in the Union. She was so happy and so excited for her new beginning as a state rather than a colony! Rhode Island giggled as she ran around the mindscape house. The house was currently kinda small, but it was cozy. Rhode Island kept on running in and around the house in excitement, eventually bumping into America. The states could only see him when he dreamed, but his company was always welcome.

"Hi, dad!" Rhode Island smiled up at America.

America chuckled, "I see you're very happy about being a state."

Rhode Island laughed. She was about to respond, but Delaware entered the room before she could say anything. Though Delaware wasn't technically the eldest, Massachusetts claimed that title, Delaware sure acted like it because he's been a state the longest. Delaware smiled at America, "Hey dad, glad to see you here."

America laughed, "Funny that, I've been trying to control my dreams but

apparently I can't do that yet. I keep getting pushed here."

"Don't complain about that, at least you aren't getting pushed into the nightmare section of your mindscape."

"That exists?" America asked rhetorically, shocked. "Jeez, now I'm glad I get pushed here."

Rhode Island giggled, "You'd have to fight off Britain if you went there."

"Aaah, not the old man!" America joked.

"Are you talking about yourself?" Pennsylvania remarked as he walked into the room holding a cup of water.

"Ouch, that hurts, Penn. I'm not that old."

"Mhm, totally." Delaware smiled, joining in.

"Changing the subject..." America started.

"Why are you changing the subject, are you afraid to admit you're old?" Penn asked, a devilish smile on his face.

America pretended as though he didn't hear that remark and continued with what he was saying, "You guys are going to have a new sibling."

Penn choked on his water and Rhode Island giggled at his response.

Penn somehow successfully survived the water nation attack and exclaimed, "We're getting a new sibling?!"

"Yes." America declared happily.

"Oh, oh, oh!" Rhode Island spoke, what America said finally dawning on her, "Will it be a him or her? What'll be their name? When will we meet them?" Rhode Island gasped, "WAIT WILL THIS BE THE CAPITAL YOU TALKED ABOUT?!"

"Ouch, my ears." Penn groaned at his little sister's reaction. Delaware smiled.

America replied, "I don't know their gender yet, they haven't been

created. Their name will be Washington D.C. You'll meet them in July and yes, this is the capital I was talking about."

"I wanna meet them, I wanna meet them!" Rhode Island chanted loudly.

"Not yet, but I promise you'll meet them soon. And, I promise you'll love your new sister or brother." America smiled.

--x--

Rhode Island was the second state to meet her little brother, D.C. When Rhode Island saw her even shorter brother, she felt very accomplished- she finally had a sibling that was shorter than her! And, they could be short buddies together!

Throughout the years, they became very close, almost inseparable. They were more than siblings now, they were best friends.

~~-~~

Rhode Island smiled as she thought about all of those happy memories and yet... she felt weird. It was as though a part of her felt... meh. It didn't care. No, it felt mad at someone. Who was it mad at? What was happening?

That's when she heard a voice echoing inside of her own head.

"Why hello... Sister."

No.

No...

No way...

No! It can't be! He died! He was killed all those years ago!

"I assure you, I am very much alive."

Rhode Island felt her heart drop.

He somehow got inside her head.

And she led him right to her heart.

She felt him trying to invade her mind, planting seeds of doubt, but she fought back. The minute she did though, she felt pain pierce through her. Rhode Island screamed in pain, attracting her siblings' attention. Delaware, who was the least in pain out of all of them, immediately rushed towards Rhode Island.

"Rhodes?" That was Delaware's nickname for Rhode Island, "Are you okay?" He reached out to hold Rhode Island's shoulder, but she quickly pushed him away despite her pain. Her siblings' safety was the priority now, she couldn't let this spread to her siblings.

"Rhode Island?" Rhode Island heard Penn say. The ground wasn't shaking anymore so the pain had died down. Rhode Island knew why. He wasn't attacking all of them anymore, just her.

She was going to say what was going on when incredible pain hit her. She screamed instead. She could only hear ringing, the pain was so bad.

"Goddammit, I was right." Rhode Island heard Texas say. Rhode Island slit open her left eye to see what was going on despite the pain.

"Right about what?" Delaware worriedly said, turning to Texas.

"When America visited earlier, she hugged him. It must've spread then. I didn't think they had been in contact long enough, but apparently they were." Texas said, frowning at his elder sister's pain.

Delaware looked at Rhode Island, worried, as Texas left. Penn shot a confused look into the hallway where Texas walked off to and started following him, no doubt asking why he left. Though Delaware didn't touch her and Rhode Island had stopped using energy to keep her left eye open, she could tell he was there, and she was glad she wasn't alone with the pain.

After what seemed like years of pain even though it was probably just a few minutes, Texas came back wearing a long-sleeved shirt

and brown, leather gloves. Penn and D.C. were right after him. Texas said to Delaware and Penn, "This probably won't work, but I can't leave her here on the cold, hard floor."

Making sure their skin didn't touch, Texas picked Rhode Island up and placed her on one of the living room couches. Since most of the states and territories were in the living room, they all saw her condition. Most of them gave Rhode Island sympathetic glances, but all of the thirteen colonies seemed to congregate around her. They had been together since the beginning, and they would be together when they were in pain, too.

They stayed like that for an hour until Rhode Island passed out. Near the beginning, Rhode Island had screamed but later on, she became eerily silent. The states didn't know which was worse. The original colonies wanted to be there for their sister but did know how to. All they could do was watch and hope for it to end soon.

Once she had finally passed out, Texas commented to Delaware, "Thanks to Rhode Island, Hawaii and Alaska had time to recover."

Delaware frowned, "But at what cost on Rhode Island? When it was happening to Hawaii and Alaska, at least we could fight for them, but for Rhode Island we can do nothing but watch. We can't help her like this."

"We could unmerge." North Carolina suggested nonchalantly.

South Carolina's eyes snapped open at that and she hit North Carolina on the back, "Don't you dare suggest that! You know as well as I do that if we all unmerge, America will die!"

"But what might happen to us if we stay?" North Carolina questioned, his eyes narrowing. Silence answered his question. The answer was that nobody knew what would happen, this had never really happened before. During the Civil War, the confederate states simply fought to get free and within a few weeks of struggling against or with their siblings, they were free. It hadn't really caused this much pain. There was pain, no denying that, but it only happened the second the split occurred and never again.

That's when Delaware realized something. He turned to his siblings, his eyes wide, "What if he's trying to force us to split from America? It makes sense, doesn't it?"

Georgia caught on, her eyes widening as well, "And his attacks are hurting those who joined us last the most because they have the weakest connections to America..."

Texas looked at Delaware, surprised. Texas's face then shifted into one of understanding, "That actually makes sense! Remember when we split? We all felt pain. What if he's trying to split?"

Penn realized it too, "But he can't split when we're still here, because that'd mean he'd have to fight America in the physical world and he wouldn't survive that."

"But if he splits when we're all in the physical world... then America's already dead without us," D.C. said grimly.

Coughing was heard behind them, "We can't split. We can't let dad die." It was Rhode Island. She had woken up and was sitting on the couch. She looked so incredibly tired. It hurt her siblings' hearts to see her so weak. Though she was a small state, she always found happiness in everything and seeing her so sad and so weak was an unfamiliar look on her.

"Hey, hey, hey, don't get up," Delaware cautioned.

"I'm not going to just stop fighting," Rhode Island looked down at her hands, "I can hear him now. He's saying such cruel things..." She looked up at her siblings, looking like she was going to cry, "He's saying such horrid things... and dad isn't fighting it anymore. He's just accepting it."

D.C worriedly looked at Rhode Island and was so tempted to hug her. D.C. felt so helpless, he couldn't hug his sister without running the risk of getting "him" in his head. If that happened, then America would be worse off because D.C.'s the capital. So instead, D.C. did the only thing he could: comfort his sister through talking. "He'll snap to his senses, Rhi. Don't worry. He'll be fine." D.C. forced a smile for Rhode Island's sake, "America's won against him before,

he'll be fine. He can win this."

Texas smiled and added, "And this time, the old bugger doesn't have me to help him."

"Or me." South Carolina smiled.

North Carolina huffed, but secretly smiled to himself, "Or me."

"Or me and my greatness. I'm telling you, I did all of the work for them." Virginia commented, smirking.

"Of course you'd tell yourself that, brother." West Virginia remarked, a devilish smile appearing on her face. "But I'd like to object-"

"Shhhhhhh," Virginia hushed his sister, "I'm sorry, I can't hear you over my awesomeness."

Georgia smiled as well and joined in, "None of us will ever go back to him. He's just angered our entire family, he won't last for long."

Texas smirked and pulled down his cowboy hat, "Time to go beat some Dixie ass."

Hi!

I stayed true to my promise! Honestly, I've edited this so many times because I'm paranoid.

Anyway, this chapter was refreshing! I really wanted to touch base with the states and their reactions to everything, as well as Rhode Island flashbacks and that's exactly what I did. This was also the chapter for big-time hints as to who the voice, or CPR, is.

Also, CPR is an acronym for something. As for what, I won't tell =)

Tschüss!

-Selva

Ch 14: Slowing Down // The New Tormentor

"Of course we're real friends, Америка," Russia said with a smile.

America smiled to himself, wiping away the remnants of his emotional breakdown a few moments before. He'd rather not talk about it. Or explain it. America forced his voice to sound as normal as possible, plastering a smile on his face, "Thanks, Russ."

Russia gave America a surprised look and quickly looked away, "What's with the nickname?"

"I mean, why not? We're friends now, aren't we?" America responded. Though he didn't show it, America started getting worried, maybe he's making Russia uncomfortable, he probably just messed everything up-

Instead, Russia looked back at America, a smile on his face, "Fair point, Meri."

America's eyes narrowed, "Why is my nickname all... girly?"

"Probably because you seem like a bottom."

America's face whipped to Russia and he stood up to face Russia, "That's not true!"

Russia started laughing. America's face held a mixture of betrayal, disbelief, and shock. That only made Russia crack up more. America huffed, "You're mean."

"No- it's just- your face-" Russia said in between laughs. He couldn't believe how much he was enjoying his time with America.

"Yeah, yeah, I get it, it's funny."

"Oh, don't be mad, Meri, I'm sure you'll fix your bottom woes in no

time."

America, closing his eyes and starting to feel a little mad, responded, "And I'm sure you'd just laugh at me along the way."

"Oh?" Russia smirked, catching on to America's mistake, "Are you admitting that you are a bottom?"

America's eyes shot open and his face could only be described as an angry tomato. Or potato. Whichever you preferred. America would've made an angry comment if it weren't for...

"Pahahahahaha!" America heard the cruel cackle of CPR's laugh. America froze and at that moment he was unable to hide the terror that flashed across his face.

Unfortunately for America, Russia noticed that flash of terror in America's face, immediately starting to feel worried for his friend. "Америка? Are you ok?"

Russia's voice seemed to snap America out of his moment of terror. America immediately put a fake smile on his face, "Y-yeah, I'm fine. Just remembered something."

"What, remember that I exist?"

'Not now, CPR.' America thought, trying to test and see if CPR could hear his thoughts.

"Pfft, you can't stop me. I thought we established this already, moron." America noted in his mind that CPR could hear his thoughts. This makes things ten times worse.

America felt irritated at CPR's comment too, but he kept a smile on his face so that he wouldn't worry Russia. America still doesn't want to bother his new friend with his problems- that would be too much to ask when they aren't even *that* close.

Russia gave America a look, "Are you sure about that?"

"Yeah, are you sure about that, America? Oh right, you're going to push me away like everyone else~" CPR commented, mocking

Russia.

'Shut up,' America thought, snapping at CPR. CPR only laughed in response.

"Америка?" Russia asked, shaking America on the shoulders a little bit.

"H-huh?" America stuttered, a little surprised. He was focusing too much on what CPR was saying.

Russia sighed, his face showing worry. America felt a pain of guilt in his heart. "I asked, are you sure about that, Америка?"

"Y-yeah, of course I am!" America said cheerily. Good, no comment from CPR this time.

"Don't count your chickens before they hatch." Nevermind.

Russia frowned, "I don't think I believe you, Америка. Every other second you seem distracted by something. What's going on?"

America clenched his fist a bit before saying happily, "I'm fine, Russia. I'm serious."

"... If you're trying to get Russia to stop asking, just leave. Didn't think I had to spell it out for you."

That's... the problem. America would feel guilty if he just left. He got way too guilty nowadays. America had a feeling that was CPR's work, but he couldn't quite say he cared at that moment. He felt an annoying ache in his side, actually. That might be the reason he didn't care so much. America refused to believe that he didn't care about something without a reason...

America looked at Russia's face for a second before guiltily looking away. Russia looked so genuinely worried and at a loss for words that America felt awful. He didn't want to worry his friend... Maybe he should just leave like CPR suggested. If he did, then maybe Russia wouldn't be so worried over someone like him.

"Now you're finally catching on. I was right, America. And you

know it."

America's eyebrows furrowed as he found a part of him enthusiastically agreeing with CPR. America frowned, but quickly realized that Russia was nearby and put a smile back on his face.

"Hey, I gotta go, Russia. I just realized I have something to do. Sorry." America lied, quickly turning and walking away.

"Америка, wait!" America heard Russia call out. Though he felt awfully guilty for doing this, he ignored Russia and kept on walking towards his hotel room.

When he finally got inside his room, America slowly closed the door, his back to it. America felt tears gathering in his eyes and slid down the door. Not again... America had to be stronger than this... He shouldn't let anyone know, it'll just bother them.

America's mind started straying back to what CPR said. Was CPR really right? Was CPR... right on everything?

No, it- it can't be...

"But it can, America."

America sharply inhaled at the sound of CPR's menacing voice. He sounded so sure of himself... so *right*...

No... he isn't... there's no way...

"Good point, America. Who's the confident one here? Who's the one who knew what to do in a bad situation? As much as you try to deny it America, you know I'm right."

"Y-you're wrong. There's no way you can be right?"

"Ok, America, when have I ever done or said anything dishonest?"

America felt his mind freeze up. He couldn't think of anything, "You call me horrible names-"

"**But they're true.**" America put his hands up to his ears and closed his eyes as if he was trying to block CPR's voice out. He almost knew what CPR would say next, "**You've killed so many, doesn't that make you a monster? You constantly make stupid decisions that risk the lives of others- I'm sure you remember Anna.**"

"..."

"**Silence is often the response that speaks the most... how ironic.**"

"...Just go away." America sniffled. He didn't want to cry, but he felt the urge to cry starting to take hold of him.

"**I can't. I'm a part of you. I will never 'go away' even if I wanted to.**" America heard hostility in CPR's voice. "**You're only a nuisance. To me. To UN. To Russia-**"

America interrupted him, "That isn't true!"

"**Isn't it? I heard your thoughts. You're only bothering him. To deny that in front of me would be doubting what you previously thought, America.**"

America couldn't deny that... he had thought he would only bother Russia... He felt so lost, so unsure of himself, and so unbelievably guilty.

"**You're worthless. You're useless. You can't even save the ones you love in your own dreams. You're a nuisance. A monster. A bother.**"

America felt tears pour down his cheeks, "N-no..."

"**Everyone would be better off if you never existed.**" CPR coldly spat. He spoke as if he was teaching one plus one to a child- an easy concept everyone can learn.

America sniffled, "No, t-that's not-"

"**Stop being a child and accept the truth, America.**"

America sharply inhaled and held his breath.

"You're nothing,"

"And you always will be."

--x--

America must've fallen asleep while crying because he woke up the next morning still leaning against his door. He was woken up to pounding on his door and a familiar Russian accent screaming at him through the door.

"Америка! Get up! We're going to be late to the meeting!"

America didn't know why, but he chose not to respond. Maybe if he didn't respond, Russia would leave. Maybe then he wouldn't have to go to the meeting and bother UN again. America didn't want to do that.

"I swear, if you don't open this door right now, I'm going to break it down!" Russia yelled out. America almost didn't believe him until he realized the was Russia. Russia's probably being serious.

With a groan, America stood up, made sure his glasses and gloves were on, and opened the door. Russia almost fell over onto America, he had been pounding on the door so hard.

Russia looked embarrassed and smiled, "Could've told me you were going to open the door."

"Sorry," America responded.

Russia gave America a weird look, "You didn't have to apologize for that."

"... Sorry?"

"Did maple leaf infect you with a virus or something?" Russia looked at America quizzically.

America looked at Russia, confused, "By maple leaf, do you mean

Canada?"

"Yeah, maple weed man," Russia replied dismissively.

America snorted and repeated under his breath, wheezing, "Maple weed man."

Russia smiled. He was strangely happy that he made America laugh and smile. America's laugh just made him happy inside- he couldn't place why. Russia coughed, hoping for his mind to move on. "So are we going to the meeting, or not?"

America hesitated before replying with a small, "Yes."

--x--

They had arrived at the meeting just on time. Many countries looked at them weirdly and raised eyebrows at the fact that they arrived together, but that was all. Mostly. Ukraine kept on smirking at Russia and wiggling his eyebrows. 'That idiot,' was the only thought that ran through Russia's head when he saw Ukraine.

America, however, was terrified. He was all too aware of the way people looked at him and it scared him. Before, he had never cared to notice these things, but several countries would give him dirty looks every once and a while, their looks becoming five times more intense when he spoke. So he didn't speak. At some point, CPR had started talking, mocking America and calling him names. He kept on saying the same things over and over again and America couldn't just tune him out, CPR was a part of America's mind, it's kind of hard to tune out thoughts you don't have control over. Even so, whatever CPR was doing must've worked, because America felt like absolute trash once the meeting ended. Nothing was bothering him physically really, he just felt really tired. He didn't feel like fighting. What was the point? How do you get rid of yourself? Wait, no, there is a way.

Russia came up to America, smiling, and asked, "Do you want to do something with me? We can do really whatever you want to do."

America weakly smiled back in response, "I'm good. I'm actually a

bit tired, so I'm going to go back to my hotel room."

America didn't like looking at the dejection that showed on Russia's face for a second. Then, suddenly, it looked as though Russia had an idea. "Then I'll join you! We can just sit down and cringe at bad movies if you want."

America forced his smile to widen, "No, no, no, I'm good, really. I'll probably just fall asleep anyway and waste your time."

Russia simply looked at America with a genuinely happy expression, "You can never waste my time America. You're my friend, aren't you?"

America would've said no to going, but he found he couldn't. He didn't want to destroy Russia's happy smile. That would've brought him too much guilt. So America did the only thing he felt he could: Nod and smile.

They ended up going to Russia's room. Why? America admittedly wasn't paying enough attention to know. Halfway through the car ride, America had started spacing out. He wondered how children were doing, painfully remembering that America was the one that caused their pain. That was one of the things CPR kept repeating during the meeting and America could've sworn CPR was right. What he said felt right somehow. America couldn't explain it well enough in words.

They had started watching a terrible movie on Netflix. America wasn't exactly paying attention to its name but it was about a vegan lion. That's dumb. America noted how quiet CPR was. CPR hadn't made a single comment yet. At some point in the middle of the movie, America got up, saying, "Hey Russia, I'm gonna go to the bathroom." Russia looked at him and gave America a thumbs-up.

America walked into the small bathroom and closed the door behind him, making sure he locked it. America exhaled, relieved. He hadn't realized how stressful acting ok had been. America looked at himself in the mirror and, after a bit of internal struggle, America took off his glasses. He looked at himself in the mirror and felt a bit disgusted by himself. He looked awful. Cracks had started

coming out of his eyes, but they were very small. America also checked his other cracks and saw how that hadn't grown a lot since last time, despite it being about a day since he checked. Was it slowing down? Why?

America had a hunch that the states had something to do with this but he wasn't sure. The ache in his side had also faded away. The headache was still there, though. America had a feeling that at this point, the states were trying more than him. America kind of felt guilty. Again. The states were doing all the work here, trying to keep America from falling apart, and America was doing nothing. It's not like America knew how to help, anyway. CPR was right once again... he's useless in this moment. America frowned at looked at his clenched fist. He wanted to help, he wanted to do something, but he couldn't. He couldn't help his children. He couldn't save his children from the pain they were undoubtedly in.

He really is worthless.

Surprisingly, America didn't feel the urge to cry, he felt surprisingly numb at the thought, actually. It was almost like the thought was the truth. It probably is. America closed his eyes, thinking. After a few seconds, America opened his eyes and put on a smile. Not an over-the-top smile, America had to make it realistic. America deemed his smile good enough and walked back to the couch, where Russia was at to continue watching the movie. America made sure he laughed whenever Russia laughed, but he was mostly spacing out.

Once the movie was finally over, America quickly found a reasonable time to detach himself from their conversation and leave towards his own hotel room. America entered his hotel room and asked to an empty room, "Why have you gone quiet, CPR?"

America waited for a few seconds. No response. In fact, his mind was completely empty except for the now-familiar throb of his headache. Even CPR is ignoring him now. That's fair. America wasn't exactly worth the time anyway. America normally would've felt hurt at being ignored, but now America felt as though he deserved it. Everything just made him guilty, hurt, sad, or numb now. America knew he should be concerned, but he wasn't. As said

before, he just felt surprisingly numb.

America looked towards the "kitchen" part of his hotel room and looked at some of the food he had bought on the first day for himself. He heard the growling of his stomach. When had America last ate? He didn't know, so he grabbed a glass of water and a bag of chips. He didn't really want to eat any more than that. Once he was done with his food, America sat down on his couch and tortured himself with all sorts of thoughts and memories. It was interesting, actually, how the minute CPR left and stopped tormenting America, America started tormenting himself.

Somehow, America drifted off into a restless sleep with all sorts of things he'd rather forget.

CPR wasn't in the nightmares, either.

America couldn't blame CPR for leaving him.

If he could, America would leave himself, too.

But nothing ever goes America's way anymore.

Yikes. I didn't know where to end this chapter so here ya go!

CPR seems to have left (if that's possible), the only question is where has he gone, and why?

Also, the next few chapters will most likely cover just one day each, since p l o t. Basically, a lot of time skips cause I need to get this book moving.

Tschüss!

-Selva

Ch 15: Спокойной ночи, Америка // The Denier

[image]

Thursday.

America decided he'd start counting the days. I mean, why not? Once Saturday came, America could go home. He wouldn't have to pretend to be happy 24/7, which is what he found himself doing way too often recently.

America woke up on his couch. He honestly didn't want to get up that morning. He had to sit there for at least 20 minutes, convincing himself that yes, he did want to go to the meeting today. America got up grudgingly and changed into a suit. Because he was too lazy, America didn't wear a tie. He did, however, once again make sure his cracks are covered. He didn't want to worry his friends and family. They didn't need to know.

America made sure he headed out early because he didn't want Russia to waste his time on him again if he was late. He also simply wanted to walk to the meeting place. The meeting started at 10:00 AM. It was 9:00 AM. He had time since the walk took 40 minutes. Now, you may ask why the hotel is that far away, but it really isn't. The drive is only 10 minutes, it's the walk that's really long. But America didn't mind, he needed time to think anyway.

When he got to the place where the meeting was held, America noticed he still had about 15 minutes to do whatever. America looked to see if someone else was as early as he was. Germany was in his seat, of course he was. America put on a smile and went up to Germany, "Hey, Germ."

"You know I hate that nickname, Amerika," Germany responded with a sigh.

"I know."

Germany looked up at America and raised an eyebrow, setting some- not all, mind you- of his papers aside. "So, what is it, Amerika?"

"Ouch, did you just assume that I came to you for a political reason? For your information, I just wanted to talk." America faked being offended.

Germany smiled, "Maybe. So, how come you're so early? Usually, the only people that come here this early are UK, China, North Korea, and me."

America chuckled, "Of course my dad is here this early. I'm here this early because I woke up early, as simple as that."

They both heard the sound of the door opening and saw North Korea enter the meeting room with China right after him. North Korea narrowed his eyes at America and went to his seat. China, meanwhile, didn't really show any emotion. He glanced towards North Korea when he started moving towards his seat, but other than that he stayed still for a few seconds. Then, China smiled slightly at America and headed to his own seat.

"Well that was weird," America commented.

Germany nodded, and they continued their conversation. Poland joined them at some point, but they kept talking until it was almost time for the meeting to start.

The meeting was pretty uneventful until the topic of nuclear weapons came up. They had already talked about it, but this time UN was asking North Korea to start decreasing his supply of nuclear bombs, just like everyone else. Oh, that made North mad. North was probably about to go into some really big and heated argument with UN right then and there when America interrupted.

"It's only fair you do, too. Everyone else with nuclear weapons is doing it." That was a big mistake.

North almost immediately turned his anger onto America. "Oh, of course you'd butt in, capitalist pig. You don't seem to understand

what's your problem and what's someone else's."

"Well excuse me if I'm trying to help keep world peace-"

"Tell that to the people you're probably killing right now." North interrupted, a calm fury hidden in his eyes now.

America didn't know how to respond, he was at a loss for words. How was he supposed to respond to that? Luckily, Russia responded for America, saving America from trying to reply himself.

"Says the guy who publicly executes his own people without hesitation." Russia spat. America flashed a grateful smile at Russia and when Russia noticed America's smile, he smiled back.

America also noticed three other countries shifted nervously in their seats. It took a second, but America realized they all executed publicly as well. Yikes.

It was obviously clear that North Korea hadn't expected Russia to stand up for America, but he definitely wasn't the only one. America could hear the faint whispers of conversation. Many countries were confused about what just happened, some seemed to be happy, and others were skeptical. America listened in on a few conversations, but quickly stopped himself when he realized his attention gravitated to more negative conversations about him. America didn't want to hear the other's negative opinions, it would just make him more self-conscious of his all-too-abundant flaws.

North Korea looked like he was about to respond, but UN beat him to it, "North Korea, Russia, and America, stand down. We're here for discussion and compromise, not mindless insults." He sighed, casting a weary eye towards some of his papers. "But I fear you need some time to cool your heads. We're taking a ten-minute recess."

North Korea scoffed and snarled, "Of course. I wouldn't expect any less. All the capitalist pig does is hide behind others, just like how the coward he is."

America glared at North Korea, and responded, "Says the coward

hiding behind China."

That only seemed to make North even angrier and he started to remark rude and insulting comments towards America. Tired and unwilling to sow any more seeds of hatred, America walked away, vaguely hearing North become louder in his insults.

--x--

Canada watched his brother leave, concern building up inside of him. He turned to Australia, "Is it just me or has America been acting weird for the last few days? He doesn't seem as stubborn or like himself."

Australia looked at his brother and thought about it for a moment, "Yeah, I guess so."

"Don't you find it concerning that the minute he starts acting weird, he suddenly puts on gloves?"

"He was wearing gloves?" Australia asked, surprised.

Canada sighed, "Yeah, he was."

"Don't sound so disappointed in me, my seat is all the way across the room! How could I have seen it?" Australia defended himself.

While Australia was talking, Canada noticed a certain ushanka-wearing country leave the meeting room to follow America. Very quickly, Canada shushed his brother and asked to no one in particular, "What the heck is Russia trying to do?"

"Huh, yeah, actually, speaking of Russia-"

"Russia just followed Ame!" Canada said, getting up. "He might try to do something like start a fight or-"

Australia just started laughing. Canada looked to his brother, both concerned and mad. Australia started speaking in between laughs, "Sorry I just- you couldn't see America's face well during the argument, right?" Canada hesitantly nodded and his brother continued, "Yeah, after Russia spoke up, they looked at each other

like they were friends and stuff. I think they worked things out without us knowing."

Canada looked a bit confused, "Why wouldn't America tell us they made up?"

"This is America we're talking about, he probably forgot."

"You have a point there," Canada sighed. "Even so, I just hope he's ok. He's just... different somehow and I don't know why or what it means."

Australia smiled, "How about we grab Kiwi and go check up on him tomorrow after the meeting? He isn't leaving until Saturday, after all."

That made Canada smile, "Yeah, that sounds great. We should tell him when he gets back."

--x--

Even though America pretended not to care, the comments North said were starting to bother him and echo in his head. They played on repeat in the back of America's head, and all he can do is find a way to ignore them. Either way, they stung a bit.

America was walking down a hallway in the UN Headquarters. America didn't know where he was walking, but it gave America something to do outside of the meeting room, so he couldn't say he cared all that much. That's when America felt a sudden, quick tap on his shoulder.

America jumped, startled, and turned around to see a certain ushanka-wearing man holding a hand to his mouth, trying to hold in his laughter. Russia, upon seeing America's startled and scared face, burst out laughing. America crossed his arms and yelled above Russia's laughter, "That wasn't funny!"

Once Russia had mostly calmed down, he replied, a shit-eating grin on his face, "Yes. Yes, it was."

America sighed, trying to change the subject as quick as possible,

"So, what's up, Russia? Why are you following me like a stalker?"

"One, I wanted to ask you if we could do something later tonight; and two, I'm not a stalker."

"You sure seem like one, Russian spy," America muttered under his breath.

Russia didn't hear what America said and questioned, "So do you want to hang out tonight or not?"

America smiled, "Uhhh, sure! I'll see if I can."

A big grin formed on Russia's face. Eventually, though, Russia's smile faded and he frowned, "We have to head back to the meeting room and deal with North first, though."

America hmmed as they started walking back to the room, "Didn't you two use to be friends?"

"Yeah, when my father was alive we sort of were; but, we haven't really talked outside of meetings since then. And I wouldn't say we're on friendly terms now. I think he hates your guts and hates me for standing up for you."

America nodded, "That sounds about right."

Russia looked at him weirdly, "Why are you so nonchalant about this?"

America shrugged, "It's always been this way." *'Though I wish it weren't...'* America thought, quickly shoving the thought away. No second thoughts, no second thoughts. He hates North, he hates North... But he knew that wasn't true anymore. He was frankly too tired to hate anyone he used to hate so much. It was confusing, but it kinda felt freeing at the same time, letting go of his stubborn hatred.

Russia gave America a small sympathetic look but didn't ask anything more. Instead, they walked in comfortable silence, not an awkward silence, but a comforting, empathetic one, if that makes any sense. America didn't really want the pity Russia seemed to be

sending his way, but America did like having someone by his side.

As they got closer to the meeting, America weakly smiled, mentally preparing himself for what might happen once he heads back inside the meeting room. Russia noticed and broke the silence, asking, "You ready?"

"Yeah," America responded as he opened the door.

--x--

To put it simply, North found a way to shut his trap. He made no further comments and instead glared at UN, America, and Russia. China, who sat next to North and still looked as unassociated and neutral as ever, took zero interest in what North was doing and instead paid full attention to UN. America could never read or truly understand China. The only emotion he's shown the entire day was the small smile he gave America before the meeting.

Once the meeting was finally over, Canada and Australia came up to America, who was turned in the other direction looking at something.

"Hey, Ame!" Ame was Canada's nickname for America, so Canada was the one who practically yelled into America's ear. That jerk. Canada knew America didn't like it when he did that.

America turned around, smiled at his brothers, and responded, "Hey Can, hey Aussie."

"Are those going to be our permanent nicknames or have you still not decided yet?" Australia asked, smiling. That's right! America promised he would give both of them permanent nicknames last month.

America thought about it and nodded, "Yep. Those are your permanent nicknames, I guess."

"I guess?" Canada raised an eyebrow.

"Yep,"

Canada smiled slightly and then got straight to the point, "So, Australia and I were thinking about going out tonight with Kiwi. We don't know what we're gonna do yet, but we can figure it out on the way."

Without thinking, America responded, "Sure!"

Then it dawned on him. Tonight. He promised Russia he would go with him tonight as well. Dang it. America immediately felt really bad. He couldn't just turn Russia down! America frowned as he thought.

"What's wrong?" Canada asked, noticing America's frown.

"I'm thinking, gimme a second." America scrunched his face up for a moment, until he suddenly smiled, "Can I invite Russia to go with us?"

Canada was a bit surprised by the suggestion, but replied, "I mean, I guess so."

"Thanks, bro!" America chirped back, quickly going over to tell Russia.

Canada smirked and turned to Australia, "I bet ten Canadian Dollars that America's gonna get drunk with Russia around."

Australia gave Canada a weird look, "I'm not gonna bet on something I know I'll lose."

Canada laughed, "You have that much faith in our brother?"

"Yep, I sure do. America's gonna be hanging out with a vodka lover and can't hold his alcohol, it'll happen eventually."

--x--

Australia and Canada were *very* right. After changing into more casual clothes, they had gone to a variety of places in New York, stopping at Central Park and staying there for a few hours, having dinner at a nice restaurant, and simply stopping here and there for various reasons. At 9:00 PM, Kiwi bade them goodbye and headed

back to the hotel because she was tired. Canada and Australia, however, stayed to see what would happen.

As expected, they passed by a bar and Russia asked, "Why don't we stop here next?" No one gave any objections, so they headed inside. Russia obviously ordered a vodka, America ordered a beer, Australia ordered ginger beer, and Canada got water, not really wanting a hangover in the morning. Also as expected, it didn't take long before America was drunk. Australia chuckled to himself and said, "Aight. I'm gonna head out now."

Canada looked at him, "Why?"

"America's drunk. I no longer have business here."

"Ouch, abandoning your brother when he's drunk?" Canada chuckled.

"I trust Russia. I dunno about you, but he doesn't look like he's gonna do anything bad. Plus, I need to call my pet sitter and made sure she is taking care of Harold correctly."

"Harold is your..." Canada thought about this, Australia had way too many pets, "... pet crocodile, right?"

"Yep!" Australia responded, "Glad you remembered!"

Canada glanced towards America and smiled, "You know what, I'll head out with you, I trust your judgment. Mostly."

Australia smirked, "Hope you don't regret that."

"Me too, Aussie, me too." Canada called out to Russia, "Hey Russia, me and Australia are heading out! When you're done, can you bring America back to the hotel? You're closer to his room anyway."

Russia simply gave an "ok," and the two brothers left.

Russia started downing another glass when he heard America groan next to him. Russia looked at the American next to him, "Wasted already, Америка?"

The only response Russia got was a hiccup and a muffled "No..." Yeah, America was drunk. Russia should've expected this, but he forgot how much of a light-weight America is. Russia, however, was still uncomfortably sober. Russia sighed and turned back to his vodka, asking for another glass. When Russia was finishing his he-wasn't-counting-how-many-vodkas-he's-drunk glass, he felt something on his shoulder. Or, to be more precise, *someone*.

Russia turned his head and saw a sleeping Америка leaning against him. If Russia was at all drunk, this both sobered him up and made his face burn red. Russia didn't know why his face suddenly felt uncomfortably hot, but he did know that it was probably time to bring America back to his hotel room.

Russia got up from his seat, stretched a little, and glanced at the sleeping American before him. *'Cute...'* Russia couldn't help but think, smiling. When Russia realized what he thought, he quickly pushed it away, his face turning red again. *'America is not cute and I'm not gay... right?'* Helpless, Russia realized he didn't know the answer to that question.

Once Russia's face stopped burning, he called over an uber so that they could get to the hotel quicker and because Russia didn't want to carry America all the way over to the hotel. Once the uber arrived, Russia picked America up bridal style, placing his in the backseat and telling the driver where to go, getting in the car himself.

As they drove, Russia glanced towards America with a small smile. This time, he didn't force it away.

Once they got to their destination, the driver was paid and Russia picked America back up again bridal-style. He got to America's room and suddenly realized he didn't a keycard to the room. Though Russia didn't like doing it, he searched America's pockets until he found the key. Using the key, he unlocked the door and practically threw America onto the bed, leaving the keycard on the kitchen counter.

As he was about to leave, Russia turned and smiled at the sleeping American.

"Спокойной ночи, Америка (Goodnight, America)."

Ch 16: Going their own ways... // The Goodbye

America woke up to pain.

To be more accurate, America woke up with a splitting headache, but that's beside the point. Trying to find the reason why, America searched through his memories of last night. He suddenly remembered heading to a bar the previous night. Ah, so that's why.

The bar...

Oh, god. America probably did something really stupid. Probably. America went back to his memories and suddenly remembered that Aussie and Can were with him in the bar, so they would've stopped him if he was about to do something. Hopefully. America's betting on the hope that Aussie and Can were kind enough that night. Even though Can is often seen as super nice- and he is, usually- Canada can be a real jerk sometimes. America just has to hope that Can was feeling nice yesterday. Suddenly, America's headache disrupted his thoughts with another round of pain.

Once the pain had somewhat subsided, America reminded himself it was Friday and meetings exist. So, America reached for Tylenol to help with his splitting headache, but at the last minute opted not to. He felt as though he deserved pain right now. The headache seemed to be warding CPR off too, which was another plus to the aching pain ripping his head apart.

Speaking of CPR, America hadn't heard CPR in a while. America could only assume CPR was doing or planning something; beyond that, America knew nothing. That wasn't exactly a pleasant feeling. The fact that someone who's been making your life miserable for the past week and a half suddenly disappears- it seems pretty damn sketchy. It's one of those things that gives you a very bad feeling that something- *something*- is bound to end up terribly. All America could hope for was that his kids weren't too hurt by whatever is

coming for him.

'Whatever happens, my kids are all that matters.' America thought determinedly, *'It doesn't matter if I get hurt.'*

'I don't matter- they do.'

America couldn't prevent that thought from floating to the surface of his mind and found it lingering there. America couldn't accurately describe his feelings towards that sentence. Somewhere deep inside, America felt disgusted by the thought and knew it was false, but the thought just felt so *true* and so *right*- and that's what truly scared America. The old him would've never thought that and it made America think that somehow, in two weeks, he's changed beyond recognition. That's he's no longer himself.

Now *that's* terrifying.

But America can't undo what's already been done, and it's probably too late now anyway.

Pushing those very depressing thoughts aside, America got ready for the final meeting, another emotional dilemma. On one side, he can go home and stop having to pretend so much around others which is a very big plus; however, if he goes home he can't talk to his friends and family- including his new friend, Russia.

That's when it dawned on America.

Russia. He's leaving today. It had almost slipped America's mind, but he vaguely remembered UN talking about it and how it was because of Russia's busy schedule or something. Unlike everyone else, Russia and some of his siblings would be leaving late on Friday, while everyone else would be leaving at various times on Saturday.

America's mind swirled with thoughts- and pain- until it finally settled on one: hang out with Russia for as long as possible after the meeting. America nodded to himself, got ready for the meeting, and drove there for once because he was almost running late. America realized too late that he could've invited Russia to join him on the

way there and cursed to himself. Whatever, it's too late now anyway.

--x--

The meeting was pretty uneventful. For reasons unknown to America- he heard rumors, but they probably weren't true- North Korea wasn't at the meeting. If America had to guess, North was still bitchy about yesterday's meeting. China was there at the meeting, though, being a neutral, impassive beotch in the corner.

But we won't talk about that.

America himself barely paid attention to the meeting, even though he knew he should've. When the meeting finally ended, America went straight to Russia, ready to ask the taller Russian man to go to the park again together.

Russia saw America heading towards him and asked, "Hey Америка, are you good?"

America gave Russia a confused look, "Uhhh, yeah? Why do you ask?"

Russia gave a small grin, "I just assumed you got a nasty hangover from how drunk you were last night."

America hissed, "We don't talk about that." After a small pause and complete change of attitude, America asked amiably, "Since this is your final day, want to hang out someplace? I was personally thinking we should go to the park by the hotel but wherever is fine."

Russia smiled, "Sure, Америка, that sounds good."

And they both went to go to the park and have fun, a few of Russia's siblings who were nearby were sort of shocked by the amiable exchange between to two "enemies." Estonia looked on in disbelief, and after a few moments of shocked silence whispered to herself, "Maybe I was wrong..."

--x--

When Russia and America got to the park, America realized he didn't know what they were gonna do. He hadn't thought that far into this. "Sooo," America started, "What do we do now?"

America heard Russia laugh and respond, "You were the one who invited me! I thought you had a plan."

"Well," America smirked, "You were wrong, vodka man."

Russia snorted and replied, "And you were shortsighted, lightweight."

America looked at Russia with a serious face, though it was obvious that he was joking, "You saw *nothing* yesterday. It was all an illusion. I hold alcohol *very* well."

Russia smiled back, playing along, "Of course, of course, what I saw must've been no more than an illusion, the true America is much greater than that."

Russia didn't know what he said wrong, but America's face fell for a second before perking back up as if nothing had happened at all. Russia was left somewhat confused- had he done something wrong?

America's smile, however, seemed brighter somehow, so Russia could only assume that it was something else, hopefully.

They continued talking while walking around, and Russia felt genuinely happy while doing so. Though there were a few moments where Russia felt the burning sensation in his cheeks similar to last night, America never seemed to notice and went on happily. Russia didn't want these small- probably unimportant- moments to end.

But nothing lasts forever, and it was soon time for Russia to go. Russia told America that he needs to pack his stuff and head out to the airport. America took it really well, even offering to drive Russia to the airport since the car Russia had been using the entire week was a rental. Russia accepted the offer and they walked back to the hotel together.

Russia got all his stuff, stopped by several of his sibling's hotel rooms to say goodbye, yelled at Ukraine and Belarus to hurry up

(Ukraine had already said goodbye to his friends and Canada), and got inside America's car, the car America had been using the entire week. Ukraine and Belarus joined them for the car ride.

Usually, leaving meetings never really meant much to Russia, but this time it felt... different and Russia couldn't place why.

When they reached the airport, they got to Russia's private plane as soon as possible. Before Russia and his siblings left, Russia said to America, "Goodbye, Америка."

"More like see you in a month," America corrected, giving Russia a small smile. "Goodbyes are too final."

Russia smiled back, turning around to head towards the plane. "Couldn't agree more, lightweight."

"Everyone's a lightweight to you, vodka addict!" America retorted, his smile a lot wider.

While walking, Russia looked back to smile at America, waving a little bit. With that, he entered his plane- his siblings were already inside and this time they were the ones waiting for Russia to hurry up. Russia decided to sit down in the seat across from his brother Ukraine. Ukraine smirked at Russia and whispered, "You two are definitely boyfriends. You can't escape the truth any longer, Russia."

Russia's face immediately went red and Russia responded way too quickly, "N-no we aren't!" Russia inwardly cursed at his unintentional stuttering.

That only seemed to convince Ukraine even more of what he was suspected, "So, is it one-sided? Does America like you back?" Ukraine glanced around to make sure their sister Belarus wasn't listening before leaning towards Russia and whispering, "Are you guys in some kind of secret relationship?"

Russia became even more flustered and responded angrily, "No! I don't like him, not at all. We're just friends so quit it, Ukraine. I'm not gay."

Ukraine leaned back into his seat and gave Russia a suspicious look

before muttering, "Брехня (Lies)."

Russia narrowed his eyes at Ukraine before growling at looking at the window, watching the plane picked up speed so it could take off. Smoothly, it started flying upwards into the air. As Russia watched their steady ascent into the sky, his eyes lingered on where America was supposed to be. America was a small dot a few seconds ago, but now he was barely distinguishable from the ground. That thought saddened Russia for some reason. America was so much more than a speck on the round, *so much more*.

What Ukraine commented resurfaced in Russia's mind: Russia and America liking each other, being in a relationship- it was impossible. But can't the impossible be made possible? Even though Russia quickly dismissed these crazy and *wrong* thoughts swirling in his head, he couldn't ignore the slight fluttering in his heart in response to the idea that maybe- maybe- that inner fantasy might come true.

--x--

As the plane slowly crawled further up into the sky, America waved goodbye at it. Even though Russia probably couldn't even see him, America waved anyway. It was more a force of habit than anything. Once the plane disappeared from view, America's hand stopped waving and fell to his side. America looked around at all the busy airport workers around him, realizing how out-of-place he was. A misplaced cog in a fully running machine. Here, he wasn't important. He could sit here for hours and he would still be out of place. He could go inside the airport terminal and sit there for hours, and no one would care. He would just be another nameless, unimportant person among thousands. Even from a plane, he's just one tiny speck among millions.

America looked around him, a sudden wave of hopelessness and worthlessness crashing upon him. With Russia, he felt useful somehow. Maybe it was because Russia cared, or maybe it was because it was so easy to make Russia smile, making America feel *useful* somehow.

With aching loneliness still echoing in America's heart, he headed

back to his car and asked the driver to drive him to the hotel. Once they were there, America went to his room and passively started packing, noticing with horror that his precious iris was wilting. Somehow, he hadn't noticed the poor flower before and immediately watered it, guilt pounding in his chest. He promised France he would take care of it... No, he promised himself he would take care of it, and now he's managed to break the promise he made to himself so long ago. It seems fitting somehow that he'd mess it up.

Once America was done packing, he once again refused sleep. One, he didn't want to go back to the nightmares, and two, America didn't feel as though he deserved sleep. After about a million alarms and slapping himself, America got through the night without sleeping. He felt awful, but America can force himself to get used to the constant tiredness.

After goodbyes to his friends and his family, America started driving towards his own plane to go home. Once he arrived at the airport, vague memories of yesterday flooded his head, and he suddenly wished he could have someone, maybe Russia, send him off. Moving on from his memories and childish wishes, America boarded the plane, holding his potted iris because the rest of his luggage was already on the plane. He placed the iris down where he knew it wouldn't topple over with turbulence and sat down in a comfortable spot that would let him look out the window.

As the plane rose into the air, America was left to wonder, how was Russia doing? And, what will come next? What is CPR planning? *Who* is CPR?

America didn't have answers for any of these questions, but he knew deep down that he will soon, it was the only thing he was sure of.

The surety in the fact that nothing- not even questions- last forever.

Ch 17: "We" \ / The Struggle at Home

A small warning before we start this chapter:

This chapter will contain very heavy topics about self-harm. If you are sensitive to this type of content, please skip this chapter.

Thank you, and have a nice day!

-Selva

America finally saw his home. After what felt like forever, America was finally home. America didn't realize how much he missed DC until, well, now.

America got out of the car he was in, thanked the driver, paid him, and stumbled into his home. America dramatically fell onto his couch with a groan. Oh, he had missed his home. His couch, his TV that he never used, everything! America felt as though he had gone off to war and was finally seeing his home again after a long, grueling battle. In a way, that was true.

Even though CPR hadn't spoken in a while, America could tell that the disembodied voice had left a mark on him, whether he liked it or not.

America didn't want to think about it- the very thought sent an eerie shiver up his spine. That was to be expected, though. America didn't like the fact that he had changed after being the same for so long. He did try to use his personality as a way of forgetting-

No! Don't think about it, don't think about it!

Diverting his mind from these thoughts that were very quickly

going in a bad direction, America looked through his phone to see if he had missed anything while on the airplane. America saw a few texts from his family and, with a small smile, answered all of them.

Just as joy was starting to creep up on America, America shot upwards in his seat. His whole body tensed up. He didn't know what was going on, but America felt as though something awful was going to happen. More than a little freaked out and scared, America stood up, accidentally knocking a glass vase off of a nearby end table. America cursed to himself and, trying to calm himself down, backed into a corner of the living room and sat down there.

What was going on?

"**You know exactly what's going on, America.**"

Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck- not him, not him. America screwed his eyes shut and hoped with all his heart he was just hallucinating from lack of sleep.

"**I'm no hallucination, idiot. Who knew that the strongest country in the world would be terrified of a voice inside of his head?**" CPR commented mockingly with a laugh.

"You're more than just a voice." America quickly responded, making sure he didn't stutter.

"**Hm, maybe,**" CPR agreed. "**But I wish I was more than whatever I am right now. And, you're going to do as I say so that I can become more than *this*.**"

"No," America said monotonously.

America could almost sense CPR's confusion. Then, America heard laughter. CPR was laughing... *at America*. "**Pfft, you-**" Another laugh. "**you think you deserve a choice in this?**"

America could feel his throat closing up. America wanted to speak- something deep inside of him wanted to yell and scream at CPR- but it felt like hands were closing around America's throat, preventing him from speaking.

"You don't deserve a *choice.* How many times have you been trusted with something and you failed? How many times have you killed *with your own hands?* Tell me, America, do you seriously think that you deserve a choice? Hahaha! That's hilarious! I see you've learned nothing, America. You are useless: you can't even save your children from getting hurt. You are selfish: you stole your states' chances to be in and live in the *real* world, where they are free to do whatever they want and free to be themselves. You are *weak*: you tremble in front of me, a mere being inside your mind, and you rely on the states- your *kids!*- for your own personal survival because without them around to support you, you die! You are a *monster*: without the slightest bit of hesitation, you killed Japan's dad, your own *son,* and so, so many people who were completely innocent and had done no wrong!" CPR paused to let what he said sink in before stating, **"Correct me if I'm wrong, *America.*"**

America didn't have anything to correct, feeling the awfully familiar feeling of guilt enclose him in it's cold, unwelcome grasp. Everything CPR said was *right*- no matter how many times America went through what CPR said in his head, it all was eerily right and correct, down to the tiniest detail. This was, after all, supposedly a being inside of his head, like the states.

America suddenly didn't like that comparison. This person- voice-*thing* is nothing like any of America's children. Even so, CPR seemed right in every way. A piece deep inside of America rebelled against this, but it was quickly shut down. As for what shut it down, America didn't know and he wasn't sure he cared anymore.

America opened his mouth to half-heartedly retort something back at CPR, but couldn't do it. It was as if he didn't have the strength to rebel anymore, as if his rebellious spirit had been forcibly sucked out of him and discarded on an empty, abandoned street like plastic litter.

CPR spoke again, breaking the silence, **"I'm so glad you understand how much of a horrible being you are. Now, since we've agreed on fact, I believe we should do something about the knowledge we now have."**

America dully nodded, not entirely paying attention anymore, his mind wandering off to place far from whatever hellhole America was in. When America came home, he expected it to be happier. This wasn't happy on any level. It was a sinking defeat, even America could admit that.

America felt something- or someone- move his head so he was looking at the broken glass vase. "**Now, America, why don't you show everyone how weak and worthless you really are?**"

Confusion filled America's mind. What? What did CPR want now? What was CPR trying to hint at?

"**Ugh,**" CPR groaned with frustration. After a few seconds, CPR spoke as if what he was saying was the easiest and most natural thing to say in the whole world, "**Cut yourself.**"

With those two words, America felt the world around him freeze. Cut... himself...? The idea had crossed America's mind before, but he didn't really take that awful choice to heart, at least... not completely. Now, he was practically being ordered to do it. Again, for the second time. This time was different, though. It felt more forced and desperate like CPR just needed it to happen and happen quickly so that he could achieve... something. Probably something big, judging by how rushed this all felt.

Even so, the idea made America feel sick to his stomach and, as warped as it probably was, eerily fascinated at the same time. Would the pain blot out CPR's voice? Would he be free from his overwhelming feelings, even if it's just for a second? America could feel the intense pounding of his heart in his chest as he slowly reached towards one of the glass shards. America picked up a shard of glass, already cutting his hand a little on the jagged broken edges. He looked at the glass with a neutral face, but America felt a twisted feeling of fascination looking at it and all the destruction but possible relief it could bring. He continued thinking about it until, without willing his hand to do so, his shaking hand moved the glass closer and closer to the pale white skin of his left arm.

The glass shard was so close to his skin that America could imagine the pain the glass shard would make. America was about to do it

when a horrible headache racked his brain. Suddenly, with the wave of intense pain caused by the headache, a wave of happy memories flooded America's mind. America could feel tears form and fall down his cheeks as he watched each memory one by one. Even with all these happy memories, however, he still felt so detached from each and every one of them, as if the person whose eyes he was seeing through wasn't him anymore. That composed and admittedly cocky person isn't the same guy as the pathetic loser about to cut himself.

That's when America remembered what Texas had said a few days earlier on Monday. Texas had looked at America in his dream and told him to resist all of these awful thoughts or... or...

The plea echoed in America's brain and with it came so many fond memories of his children, the states and territories. Tears continued to fall down America's cheeks as he seriously considered doing it. It felt as though this could be America's breaking point. Even so, America had resisted this once... but does that mean he can resist it again?

Does he even want to resist it again?

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING?! JUST DO IT ALREADY!" America heard CPR scream. The scream felt so very distant now, as if it was just one tiny speck amongst many.

One tiny speck...

One tiny...

One...

...

...

With a small clink, the piece of glass fell on the floor.

It took all of America's willpower to do it, though America wasn't sure if it was just his willpower anymore. The states probably were with him, after all... Probably...

America hugged himself and looked down at the floor, trying to get himself to calm down and stop shaking. He sat there without moving for what felt like ages- though it was really just thirty seconds- until he had calmed down enough to look up. His attention was immediately drawn to the piece of glass.

America, whose face now held a look of unfathomable disgust, kicked the glass shard across the room, watching as it slammed into a chair and shattered into what was possibly millions of tiny pieces.

Gasping from what he just did, America said shakily, "I won't. I will never cut myself. Never. No. I can't, I promised to-"

"**Did you just *defy* me?**" CPR scowled, interrupting America, "**... You don't seem to understand, do you, America?**" In an instant, all feelings of victory America had started to feel vanished. America felt dread form deep inside his soul.

"**Maybe I should teach you another lesson.**"

With no time spared, America felt his throat close up again, except this time it was at least ten times worse. It was so bad that America could barely breathe. America's hands went to his throat, trying to pull off a hand off of his throat that wasn't even there in the first place.

"**You are worthless, America. You deserve everything awful that has ever happened to you. You are weak, disgusting, fat, and an unlovable bastard. If I could, I'd kill you right here and now. Unfortunately, I don't have the power to do that yet.**"

America harshly coughed as the pressure left his throat.

CPR growled threateningly, "**Watch your back America. Check every crevice in every room because I promise you this: I will have my revenge and I will take back everything you ever took from me. Just for fun, I'll make you lose everything you've ever held dear, too.**"

America's breath caught in his throat. He's fine with being hurt himself, but his family and the people he cares about? America

wouldn't be able to live with himself if they were hurt at his expense.

"This is *our* revenge, and I promise you that we will take back our futures and kill you."

That's when America heard an angry, spiteful, and familiar voice; but, it wasn't CPR's:

"...No matter the cost, 'Dad.'"

Ch 18: Taking a Stand \ / The Battle

Texas sighed as he gazed at his siblings. Several were worn down, but that was to be expected. They were retaliating with their full force today. No one really knew how this would turn out, but it was better than doing nothing. Texas cleared his throat to get everyone's attention, "Okay, everyone. I know we're all tired, and nobody knows how this might go, but we need to remember one thing: we're doing this for dad and each other. If we let this bastard stay in our mind, it's over for us! We all know that most of us can't survive without dad, so this isn't just about protecting him anymore, it's about staying alive and together, as a family!"

Several states and territories cheered, but several others, including North Carolina, stayed silent, each of them having their reasons for staying silent. Texas cast his elder brother North Carolina a disappointed glance but said nothing. Montana suddenly stood up and shouted, "United we stand, divided we fall!"

There were more cheers that time, and everyone separated briefly to prepare themselves. Cali went up to Texas and asked, "Are you sure we aren't in over our heads? Something is giving me a bad feeling."

Texas clenched his fists and gritted his teeth, "What other choice do we have? If sit here and do nothing, we'll fall apart."

Cali looked down, "And if we fail...?"

"That won't happen," Texas hissed. "We can't afford it happening."

Michigan walked up to the both of them, interrupting their conversation, "I did as you asked, Tex."

"Who can fight?" Texas asked.

Michigan clicked his tongue, "For the most part, everyone. Those who can't fight are Rhode Island, Hawaii, Alaska, Arizona, New Mexico, American Samoa, Northern Mariana Islands, Virgin Islands, and Puerto Rico. All of them can't fight due to, well, obvious reasons."

Texas slowly nodded, but then he realized something, "Wait a second, Puerto Rico? He was acquired in 1899- if he's down then Oklahoma should be too."

Michigan shook his head, "He's a territory, so he's bound to have weaker ties to America than us."

Texas sighed, "You're right, you're right, I'm just worried, y'know?"

"We all are," Cali said with a slight smile. "These are our siblings, after all."

Texas nodded and looked back at Michigan, "So, is everyone ready?"

Michigan smirked at his brother, "Ready when you are, Tex."

"Well then, let's give Dixie a run for his money," Texas smirked back, cracking his knuckles.

Cali elbowed Texas in the side.

Texas jumped a little at the sudden jab in his side and gave Cali an angry look, "What the actual hell was that for?!"

Cali hissed back, "If you think you can just waltz into Dad's nightmares like that, you're wrong," She glared at Texas before sighing and looking at the floor. "The Nightmare section of Dad's mind is obviously where he's the strongest. We won't be able to beat him in his own turf- we can barely hold him off in our own home."

"What are we supposed to do then?!" Texas shot back. "We can't just do nothing!"

"And I'm not suggesting doing nothing, I'm just suggesting making him fight on *our* turf," Cali smirked.

Michigan quickly caught on and exclaimed, "So we wait until he attacks next and hit him with all we got when he gets cocky!"

Cali pointed at Michigan in excitement, "Exactly! He attacks first, and we pull back on our fighting power so he gets arrogant and reckless. While he's still blind from arrogance, we hit him with all we got, then take the fight to his turf while he's still weak and shocked!"

Michigan nodded, "Got it! I'm telling everyone about our plan!" With excitement fizzing throughout his body, he quickly went to the others to tell them of their plan.

Texas chuckled at his sibling's excitement, "I guess that's our plan now."

"I'm sorry you didn't have any room to input anything there." Cali apologized, reaching to scratch the back of her neck.

"Nah, it's fine. I think your plan is really good. Good job thinking that up, sis."

"It wasn't just mine though, give Michigan some credit. Also, It's no problem- we have to stay together as a family." Cali looked a little embarrassed at the compliment and smiled a little. She glanced at Michigan, who was happily telling some other midwestern states about the plan they just made, and sighed, "I probably gotta make sure Michigan doesn't do anything stupid. Hold the fort for me, okay?"

"I will." Texas smiled.

Cali nodded and started walking towards Michigan. She had already walked a good distance away when she realized something and called out to Texas, "Don't forget to check up on Rhode Island!"

"I'll go check up on her now since I have time!" Texas responded. Cali gave him a thumbs up and continued heading towards Michigan.

Texas started heading up the stairs. They recently got Rhode Island to go to her room to rest since she wasn't doing so good. If anyone

here was hit the hardest, it was her. Half of the time, she was the only one targeted, which meant there wasn't much her siblings could do to help other than verbal support, but that can only do so much.

Texas entered Rhode Island's room. Since this was a mental space, not a physical one, everyone had their own rooms. Texas felt a pang of sorrow at the sight of Rhode Island. She looked so pitifully weak, it didn't even look like she could sit up anymore. Texas felt awful, but he couldn't do *anything*, he couldn't even help his older- and shorter- sister.

"Hey Rhodey, how are you doing?" Texas asked, sitting down on the floor in front of Rhode Island.

Rhode Island gave Texas a weak smile, not even bothering to get up because she knew she couldn't, "Tired, but I'm not in pain right now, at least."

Texas nodded, the sadness and pity in his heart only growing, "I'm sorry you have to go through this, Rhodey."

Rhode Island just kept on smiling, though, "If it means I can save my siblings from pain for a few hours, I can take it. After all, I have all my siblings supporting me, right?"

"Of course, we'll always support you." Texas didn't hesitate to say.

"Then I'll happily take it," Rhode Island glanced at the door before saying. "I think it's time you head downstairs, though. I don't think our younger siblings will listen to anyone without you being the one keeping them in check."

"Are you sure you want me to leave so soon? I can stay if you want."

With what little energy she had, she shook her head, "No, I'll be fine. Go help our siblings."

Texas hesitated before he nodded and stood up. He started towards the door before turning around and saying determinedly, "Don't worry Rhodey, you won't be in pain much longer." With that, he left

the room, a determined expression on his face.

Dixie's gonna *pay* for hurting his family.

--x--

They had all waited, ready, for what felt like hours. They didn't have much else to do.

They waited, and waited, and waited...

Until it hit.

The pain that had become so familiar in the past weeks hit, suddenly and forcefully. Some states cried out in pain and anger, but New York signaled for them to save their strength for the attack they had planned. They waited through the pain with no resistance until they were sure their enemy was starting to become arrogant and sloppy.

D.C. was the one who shouted for everyone to attack. Once the states heard his cry, everyone fought back against the painful force surrounding them. With the strength they had all been saving, they felt the pain almost instantly vanish.

It had worked! Their plan worked!

Several states had started cheering, but North Dakota stopped them, saying, "We have to attack him for real now that he's surprised- we have no time to celebrate."

The cheering settled down and, with one final, sure glance between themselves, they all left their home and entered America's nightmares, the place "Dixie" -as Texas and several southern states nicknamed him- had been for the past week.

As they walked closer and closer towards the center and the place they knew where "he" was, the sights around them only became more and more horrifying- so bad they even scared several states. Long story short, it wasn't a pleasant sight to see. The original colonies (excluding Rhode Island) didn't even flinch, though. They were the only ones who didn't. The other states could only guess as

to why they didn't seem to react at all, but the most plausible reason was that they had learned to ignore it. They had, after all, physically been in the first half of the American Revolutionary war. But some states with keen eyes had noticed it: how their older siblings weren't fearless; no, they were just pretending to be so that their younger siblings wouldn't get worried and even more scared.

Even though fear and uncertainty dwelled in everyone's hearts, they continued onward for the plan for their siblings, their dad, and their survival.

They eventually walked through the murky and terrifying memories until they reached a section where even nightmares refused to dwell. As expected, there he was.

The Confederate States of America.

Several states growled upon sight, *he* was the one who had caused all of them this pain. *He* was the one who was trying to force them to split.

But he wasn't alone. A shorter, shadowy figure stood a few small steps behind him. The only color that could be seen on this figure's flag was red, but his presence felt familiar. Like he was one of the states...

Upon this realization, Illinois growled and stepped forward, "Traitor! Reveal yourself, coward!"

The figure turned to look at Illinois, but then stepped back, whispering so that only Confederacy could hear, "You fight them, I'll support."

Confederacy turned to his ally, about to yell at him for stepping out of the fight, but with one shared glance, he understood and said, "Okay, okay, I can buy time."

The figure flashed a small smile before stepping back further into the murky darkness of America's nightmares.

Delaware frowned, "Are we all ready?"

"Ready when you are," Virginia smiled back, feeling energized and ready. Several other states nodded in agreement and Texas grabbed his gun.

Oklahoma noticed Texas's gun and asked, "I thought you said we don't need physical weapons?"

"We don't," Texas grinned. "But I want one."

Oklahoma shook his head before focusing back on Confederacy, waiting patiently with an amused look on his face, as if he saw all of this as a pleasant game. This pissed North Carolina off, and he started running up to Confederacy, yelling, "You bastard! This is for hurting my siblings!"

Confederacy's smile only grew wider as North Carolina came close to him. Blinded by his rage, North Carolina didn't seem to notice how eerily calm Confederacy was. Dixie's eerily calm seemed to give off the impression that Dixie knew exactly what North Carolina would do and how to stop it.

"North, wait!" South Carolina yelled out, noticing Dixie's eerie calmness.

But North Carolina heard it too late.

Before North Carolina could do anything, Confederacy grabbed him harshly by the neck, strangling him. North Carolina immediately struggled against Confederacy's grip, a look of stubborn defiance shown plainly on his face as he desperately tried to pry Dixie's hand off of him.

Virginia growled and started running towards the Confederate to save his brother, "Let him go!"

Confederacy simply responded with a cruel, smug smile, "If you come any closer, I won't hesitate to kill him. He may have been one of my states, but frankly, I don't care anymore." That made Virginia freeze in his place, he didn't want his brother dead. He could do nothing but watch as his brother was getting choked. The very thought made Virginia grit his teeth.

"Damn Dixie." Texas spat, cocking his gun up. He turned to Oklahoma, "Hey, Sooner!" Oklahoma turned to face Texas at the sound of his nickname, a little bit startled. Texas continued now that he had Oklahoma's attention, "I'm gonna try to get a shot on Dixie, you and the rest of the states do something instead of standing there-" Texas though for a moment before adding, "distract him and give me a good shot, ight?"

Oklahoma nodded, a grim expression on his face. He quickly went around to tell the other states what they were gonna do, and each state reacted differently to the idea. Some offered to form guns and shoot from a distance to help Texas, while others volunteered to distract Confederacy from a short distance. Everyone had their own, personal plan, but they were all working towards the same goal: to defeat Confederacy. It was how it had always been with the states.

The group got split in half, with half of the states staying behind for long-distance support and the rest of them ready to beat Confederacy to a pulp. Those who chose to fight Confederacy close up were staying a safe distance away so that North Carolina wouldn't get hurt. One of the states in this group, however, was waiting for something- waiting for her moment to help her brother.

BANG!

A bullet coming from behind whizzed through the air, hitting Confederacy in his arm. Due to the sudden pain, Confederacy's grip and focus faltered for just a moment. And South Carolina, seeing her chance, seized the moment. She immediately ran up and elbowed Confederacy in the face, yelling, "Get your damn hands off of my little bro, you dickwad!"

The force of her blow and the momentum she put behind it hit hard and distracted Dixie long enough so that she could snatch her brother and quickly sprint away from the Confederate.

Immediately, several states ran up to do their jobs: distract Confederacy, maybe pull out some fake punches, and get him not to focus on those who are going to shoot at him and do the major damage.

What they never accounted for, though, was the shadowy figure. The shadow figure came out of hiding, a slightly bothered look on his face. He aggressively tossed Confederacy a gun and said, "Use this, and don't be dumb with it this time."

A psychotic grin formed on Confederacy's face as he wrapped his hand around the gun, "Who said that I was being dumb with it last time?"

"I did." The figure retorted, with frustration in his voice.

Confederacy's grin only became wider, "Fine, fine, I won't aim for the vitals like I did with Canada in the dream."

The figure crossed his arms as if he was annoyed, and stepped back into the darkness of the nightmares without further comment. Confederacy simply groaned and muttered, "Oh now he's just being moody, I told him to cut off his feelings for his siblings." Even with his complaining, however, Confederacy looked more alive and aware now that a gun was in his hands. Texas was finding it even harder to get a good, deadly shot.

Connecticut was the first one to shout out, "Everyone, be careful with his gun! Dodge!"

The states that were close up to Confederacy scattered a bit, but still attempted to keep on attacking. Kansas was the first one to try and stab Confederacy with a knife.

...

Confederacy shot him with no hesitation. In fact, he looked exhilarated watching Kansas fall on his knees in response to the shock and pain of the shot. Heck, watching him bleed out was *exhilarating*. Several states around Kansas froze up, suddenly very terrified. Steeling themselves for what was ahead though, the states quickly continued to try and attack Confederacy, despite their fear. Several states did fall back though to do long-distance attacks out of fear and the fact some of them couldn't dodge well for the life of them. In all the movement, Nebraska snatched Kansas and started bringing him back to the house to get treated for his wound.

Confederacy shot many times after that but kept on missing, despite the short distance. Honestly, he was probably rusty. But then again, he was also trying not to hit any vitals due to his ally's request, which was a lot harder and more frustrating request than what Confederacy thought it would be. He would often than not aim for an arm or a leg, which was practically impossible due to how much the states around him were moving. They were like a lot of multicolored sonics.

Dixie hated this.

Out of anger and frustration, Confederacy suddenly thought 'screw this' and charged straight towards the nearest state to him, his gun cocked and ready to shoot whoever and where-ever. At this point, he could honestly care less if he massacred them all.

There was a major flaw with Confederacy's plan though: He wasn't keeping his eye out for everything properly. Texas had a shot on the sad bastard.

Texas grinned and signaled to the states around him to aim and shoot on the count of three so that they could all shoot at once. Confederacy wouldn't be able to dodge this.

3...

2...

1...

"Die, fucking bastard!" Texas shouted out, victory evident in his voice.

BANG!

Confederacy's head immediately snapped towards the direction of Texas and all the other states who had just shot at him. His eyes widened in sudden fear at the sight of about twenty bullets heading straight for his head.

"I don't think so." The shadowy figure from earlier came out of the nightmares and his white teeth glinted in a partially visible grin.

The bullets that were whizzing through the air suddenly paused, still floating in the air.

A new, very short figure that hadn't been there mere milliseconds earlier stood in front of Confederacy with her hand raised in the air. She faced the bullets with an emotionless face and lowered her hand. In response, the bullets clattered to the floor.

"Oh no..." Georgia gasped, tears coming to her eyes as she recognized the figure in front of them.

Despite the short figure's pitch-black eyes and emotionless face, she was still very recognizable.

...

Rhode Island.

Ch 19: Giving up \ / The Puppet on Strings.

Despite the short figure's pitch-black eyes and emotionless face, she was still very recognizable.

...

Rhode Island.

---x--- (we're going back in time)

Rhode Island laid down on her bed, hearing the door close and hearing Texas walk away to their siblings. She felt tired, but that was becoming normal for her at this point. Why complain? At least she was helping her siblings. Maybe even dad, but she wasn't sure how if she was. All she could do now is wait. But that's assuming she even knew what she was waiting for anymore. Waiting to die? Waiting to be separated from her siblings? Waiting for the pain again? Rhode Island wasn't sure.

She laid there for a while until she just knew that the pain was going to happen soon. She was way too good at telling when the pain was about to start through little changes in the atmosphere of the room, which is understandable considering that waiting for these changes is the only thing she can do if her siblings aren't around. She started bracing herself for the pain that would happen any minute now...

But she wasn't prepared. How could she? This pain felt ten times worse than every other time, and she thought the previous pain was bad. The pain consumed her body, it was all Rhode Island could think about. The pain scattered her own thoughts and awareness easily. She felt like she was being ripped apart into tiny pieces, it was awful. No, it was more than awful. It was agonizing.

Amongst the pain though, she heard a voice. She couldn't focus on

individual words however. It all sounded muffled. Rhode Island kept fighting back against the pain though, it was the only thing she could focus on through the pain: to fight back no matter what. After a few minutes of fighting back- though it felt like hours of endless agony- Rhode Island realized that she didn't have enough energy to fully fight back anymore. Dread formed deep inside her soul in response.

Rhode Island coughed harshly and opened her eyes to see a blurry splotch of red on her bed. Upon the sight of blood, it seemed to dawn on Rhode Island that she needed help and couldn't face the pain alone this time. Trying to gather what little energy she had left, she called out for help. Her voice was weak, but she kept on calling out for help.

...But nobody came. Not once. No matter how loudly Rhode Island screamed or how desperately she cried, no one ever came. Tears started falling down Rhode Island's cheeks as she kept on sobbing out for help, her voice growing quieter with each new cry. No matter what she did, Rhode Island was left there alone and in incredible pain, her spirits and hope dropping even lower by the second.

Among the sadness and intense pain, Rhode Island started hearing an eerily familiar voice, but she was in so much pain that she couldn't place a name to the voice, "**Isn't this cruel? You're calling out for help and yet none of your siblings are coming to help you in your time of need. Some family, huh?**" The eerily familiar voice asked spitefully. It only made Rhode Island sob one final time, was her family really not coming to help her? Rhode Island tried to shake her head, but all that happened was another bloody cough that racked her entire body.

"**We're similar in that way, I guess. When I needed help, my 'family' left me to die. We've both been abandoned by our family. Right, sis?**" The voice continued, traces of contempt starting to creep into his voice.

Rhode Island felt her heart object, but didn't have enough energy to say anything anymore, she had wasted all that energy on calling out for help. So, Rhode Island scraped up what was left of her energy

and tried to focus on using it to fight back against, but she couldn't even properly focus on that. With her hope plummeting, the only thing she could think about was how this voice was one of her brothers'. However, even that thought left her after a few more seconds of pain.

The familiar voice continued, this time the voice was better at hiding the spite and contempt laced in his voice, "**Join me, and we can be a family together. I promise I'll never abandon you like they have. I can get rid of all your pain and sorrow. I'll leave only happiness behind. You'll finally get the rest you deserve.**"

After one final push against the voice, Rhode Island didn't have enough energy to fight back anymore and felt pain consume her. Maybe if she just stopped fighting back then she'd finally get the rest the voice is talking about. Rhode Island felt her mind start to go numb and slow down. No more pain... Happiness and sleep... that all sounded so nice...

The voice murmured softly, "**I knew you would make the right choice. Rest now, sis. I'll take it from here.**"

Rhode Island felt a strange murkiness and numbness start to take a hold of her mind. She couldn't fight back anymore. Heck, she wasn't even sure if she truly wanted to fight back at this point... Sleep sounded like heaven right about now...

Deep down, Rhode Island knew that she should stop this, fight back, do *anything*, but she didn't. She knew she's lost this battle, and can only hope that her siblings will win the war for her. As her mind succumbed to the pleasant numbness that was capturing her mind, she had one final thought: "I'm sorry, dad..."

With that, her consciousness was forcibly shut down and her fully-white eyes fluttered to a close. After a few long moments, her finger twitched.

Like a puppet on strings, she stood up numbly and opened her now pitch-black eyes, her mind shut down and her body being controlled by someone else

--x--

"Oh no..." Georgia gasped, tears coming to her eyes as she recognized the figure in front of them. "How did this happen?" She asked no one in particular.

The figure, who stood behind Rhode Island, decided to grace that question with an answer, "Well, it's quite simple, really. I just kept on attacking her psyche until she ran out of energy and couldn't fight back. It was really sad, actually. Watching her cry out for help... only for no one to come."

Several states were taken aback by that. If they had just stayed by her side... would that have made a difference? Would their sister still be herself?

Even though they were talking about her, Rhode Island stood there like a robot following orders, compliant and frighteningly neutral about everything. It was almost as if she couldn't hear what everyone was saying. The shadowy figure had a small, awkward smile visible on his face as he started walking towards Rhode Island. He stopped walking when he reached Rhode Island's side. The figure spoke, putting one of his hands on Rhode Island's right shoulder, "Now, we can go about this two ways," With his other hand, he took out a knife and handed it to Rhode Island, who stared at it with a blank look on her face. "One, you all leave and no one gets hurt. Two, I'll have your sister here kill herself."

Connecticut growled, "You little piece of-"

The figure interrupted him, anger lacing his voice, which made Rhode Island look up and blankly stare at Connecticut, "I would be careful with your language there if you don't want anyone to get hurt."

Delaware stood up, an unsure gaze lingering on Rhode Island for far too long before looking at the figure threateningly, "Stop this right now and let her go. We have more people, we can easily take you down."

The figure shook his head once again, smiling at Delaware with

pity, "Maybe you could've taken us down if Rhi took longer to get here, but now that she's here, she's a very willing hostage; and, I'm guessing most of you don't want to see her dead on the floor, do you?"

Delaware looked down at the ground before looking back at his siblings and seeing his own reluctance reflected in their eyes. No one wanted to see their sister get hurt, but if they did nothing, they'll split eventually. Delaware had to fight back tears that were threatening to form. Was this really all their efforts amounted to? A sacrifice? Defeat? He knew what he had to do- sacrifice his sister for the good of everyone else- but his heart couldn't do it. How could he? How could he sentence his sister to her own death? How could he when his sister has no idea where she is or what she's doing? That wouldn't be fair, not at all. Rhode Island should have the right to make that choice, not him.

Delaware also doubted what good it would do. Sure, they could continue fighting if Rhode Island died, but would they be able to? Probably not. Rhode Island's death would absolutely crush their spirits, especially because she'd be *killing herself*. Delaware doubted anyone would be able to fight properly after that. Delaware hated this. With just one person, the entire outcome of this fight had turned completely into Confederacy's favor and none of the states can do anything about it.

Delaware glanced back at his siblings once more, asking what they wanted with a look in his eyes. Even so, Delaware didn't need a glance to tell that they all would answer the same as him. Delaware turned back to look at Confederacy, Rhode Island, and the shadowy figure next to them and sighed. He clenched his fists and, with defeat in his voice, decided, "We'll leave... just don't you dare break your side of the deal."

The figure smiled slightly and responded, "I would never."

Delaware turned around, fighting tears, "Let's go..."

Dejectedly, they headed back towards their home, everyone weighed down with incredible loss. They had lost the battle, they had lost their sister, and they had probably lost the only chance

they ever had to stop Confederacy. All they could do now is hope.

Hope that this wasn't their end.

--x--

The shadowy figure faced his ally, and commented with surprisingly neutrality, "They know for sure that it's you behind all of this now, and they know the ace up our sleeve too."

"Hey, they didn't figure out who you are, PR. Don't shoot us down yet, we haven't lost every secret we're keeping," Confederacy shot back, still slightly irritated that his partner ended up doing more than him in that fight.

PR glared at Confederacy, "Yes, but they know that there's a traitor among them. I don't think it'll take long until they figure out who I am."

Confederacy shot PR a look and complained, "You're too paranoid sometimes."

"You're too carefree *and* hot-headed sometimes." PR rebutted.

Confederacy chuckled, "True, but at least I know when to have fun."

"I don't think I like your version of 'fun.'" PR sighed, "I can't afford anyway to have fun unlike you, C. I have millions of people I have to protect." PR tapped his foot on the floor and glanced at his puppet, Rhode Island, with slight disgust. "Do we really have to have her standing there? She's kinda creeping me out."

"Yeah, we do. She's a puppet, after all. She wouldn't scream even if she was being sliced in half." Confederacy said casually with a small chuckle.

PR shivered at that thought. After one final disgusted glance at Rhode Island, he changed the subject, "So, what do we do now? We have the upper hand now that Rhode Island is on our side."

Confederacy smiled maniacally and turned around to look into the nightmares surrounding them, "It's quite simple, actually."

PR tilted his head questioningly.

Confederacy continued, his smile only growing, "We break them over and over and over again until they fall apart like glass."

Confederacy walked up to Rhode Island and held her by the chin, looking into her pitch-black eyes smugly.

"That, and we make use of this one while we still can."

~~~~

Ok, sorry for the short chapter and A/N (I don't like doing them anymore), but I just have to warn you that December is a really busy month for me, so unfortunately I won't be able to continue writing chapters in this book until around the 21st.

Thank you for understanding, and I'll see you on the 21st with a double chapter and (maybe) a small surprise.

Have a great day!

-Selva
~~~~

Ch 20: Falling Apart \ / The Beginning of the End

It had been two weeks since the meeting had ended, and America would be understating it by a lot if he said those two weeks were just stressful. They were a whole rollercoaster of questionable emotions. Mostly sadness though.

Recently, America got into a routine that he couldn't say he was certainly proud of, but it was too normal at this point for America to want to change it. America's routine goes as such: Wake up in the morning, question the existence of life for a few minutes to avoid getting up and doing stuff, get ready for work, go to work, realize he forgot to eat breakfast... again, work, forget to go to lunch, more work, meetings, go home, water the iris, eat dinner for the state's sake, usually have a "nice" conversation with CPR, try to pull an all-nighter, occasionally fail to do so, and repeat.

It's a great routine, isn't it?

As usual, America was going through the routine. Right now, he's heading home. When America got home, he watered the iris and proceeded to start making dinner. And by that I mean heat up leftovers. After only eating about a fourth of his meal, America stopped eating and started putting away his food. Normally, CPR would be saying something by now, but he was quiet today. America couldn't say he knew why, but he hoped this was a sign there'd be no nightmares tonight if CPR is busy with something else.

To burn time, America went on his phone to simply browse the internet, it's not like he had anything better to do, anyway. At some point, America fell asleep, his head dropping onto a pillow nearby.

~~-~~

America opened his eyes to the magnificent sight of a city. Or the closest thing to a city. With just a simple look around, America knew that this

dream was happening sometime in the 1700s, most likely before the Revolutionary War. America couldn't recognize which city, though. It had been too long for America to remember specific details.

"America!" America heard a very familiar voice: Rhode Island. America turned around and smiled, seeing Rhode Island run over to him happily.

"You're late, slowpoke!" Rhode Island complained and hit America lightly on the shoulder, which was actually kind of difficult due to how short she was.

"Late for what?" America asked, smiling slightly. There was finally a good dream for once. Or, at least that's what he thought.

Rhode Island tilted her head a little bit and frowned, but didn't answer.

America looked at her, confused, "Rhi? What's wrong?"

"Do you really not know?" Rhode Island looked really heartbroken.

America felt dread like a stone in his stomach, "Not know what?"

Rhode Island looked at the floor, her gaze empty. She looked like some sort of puppet, a toy for a child to play with. America's worry multiplied.

"Rhi, What's wrong? Answer me, please," America was getting even more worried by the second. This felt frighteningly real. Too real. America didn't like this. He wanted to go back to the normal torture because this felt so real it hurt.

Rhode Island's head suddenly shot up, her eyes wide open- and pitch-black. "You were too late to save me. None of them saved me either. Everything has gone wrong," She stepped forward and gave America a look of pure hatred, "AND IT'S ALL YOUR FAULT!"

With that scream, the road underneath her broke. America stepped back, his heart breaking upon hearing his own daughter say that, "What do you mean, Rhi? What happened?"

"A lot of things," A new voice said, stepping in. Wisconsin. Wisconsin cast a sad look at Rhode Island, before quickly running in between her and America. "If you don't mind, I'm gonna steal Dad for a sec."

A look of irritation contorted onto Rhode Island's face. With a growl that reminded America of a pet wolf, she lunged towards America. Wisconsin quickly turned around and whispered "sorry" to America before pushing him roughly into a portal that had formed behind him.

America landed hard onto what felt like grass and immediately jumped up, looking around to find himself just outside of the state's place and surrounded by almost all of the Midwestern states. "What the...?" America muttered to himself.

"Sorry about that," Indiana apologized with a small laugh. "We didn't have any other way to bring you here."

"And you won't be able to stay here for long," Iowa added.

"So, we have to explain to you really quickly about what's happened." Minnesota joined in.

America looked around at the shorter states and nodded for them to continue.

"So basically-" Missouri tries to start professionally but got interrupted by Iowa.

"- Rhode Island went to the dark side."

Missouri turned to Iowa and gave him a slightly irritated look, "Seriously? Now you start making Star Wars references?"... And then they started bickering.

The state who just happened to be stuck between the two, Illinois, yelled out, "Both of you shut up, or I'll make you!" Though it was kinda harsh, the two did shut up, much to the relief of a peeved Illinois.

Ohio glanced at them for a second, before continuing, "Yeah, Rhode Island betrayed us, though I doubt it was willingly. It was almost like she was a puppet. Confe-"

A shriek split America's head and he almost immediately fell to his knees in pain. The other states heard the shriek and felt pain too, but they didn't nearly feel as much pain as America did when they heard it.

America saw the world around him start to fade to black. The states noticed how America was fading out of their reach, so Ohio shouted out, "Our enemies are-!"

*But Ohio got cut off abruptly as America was suddenly in a pitch-black void. "**Well, that was a close call.**" CPR's voice rang out in the empty void.*

America's heat shot upwards and his eyes were filled with rage, his mind immediately flying back to what the states said. Rhode Island betrayed them, betrayed him*, and America knew exactly who was at fault, "Why did you bring her into this?! She didn't deserve becoming your little puppet!"*

*Silence greeted America. America clenched his teeth and was about to say more when CPR finally responded, angry, "**You know very well that the minute she sided with you, she was already in this. It was you, after all, who's failing to keep everyone together. Those cracks on your arms are proof enough.**"*

America sharply inhaled, clenching his fists and looking down at the floor. America stayed silent, refusing to give CPR the pleasure of hearing a response.

*"**Well that won't do,**" CPR stated, sounding disappointed, "**Where's all your defiance gone? Where's the anger?**" If he could see CPR, America guessed the bastard would be smirking right about now. America knew he was being provoked, but his anger got the better of him.*

"It's ok if you hurt me, honestly at this point I don't care. But, leave my family out of this! I'm the one who messed up, not them! So, leave them out of this or I will find you and make sure *you regret it!" The minute those words left America's mouth, he regretted them. No doubt CPR would retaliate, but the part that scared America was how.*

*After a few moments of terrifying silence... "**And, I'll make sure*** **you** ***regret that.**"*

The void around America shifted and changed, and America was launched into one heartbreaking moment after another until morning

came and woke him up from his worst nightmares in tears.

How could a weakling like him keep the union together?

How could a weakling like him even keep his own mind from falling apart at the seams?

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--*x*--

The Midwestern states (excluding Kansas) ran into the giant house, each state practically running over each other with Illinois and Missouri making it their goal to annoy each other as much as possible while running. The Midwestern states ran into the living room to try and find Texas, California, and Delaware, who had pretty much established themselves as temporary leaders. Once the chaotic group finally located the three, they ran over to explain what had just happened. After interrupting each other several times while trying to explain, they finally managed to get out the entire story of what had just happened with America and how America probably doesn't know that the one they're up against is actually two- a traitor *and* Confederacy.

"That sounds like a big problem," Delaware said when they were done.

"How is dad supposed to fight back if he doesn't know who he's fighting?" Michigan asked, worried.

South Dakota shrugged, "I dunno, don't ask me." South Dakota's comment only seemed to make Michigan even more worried.

"How are we supposed to stay together if dad can't fight back?" Iowa asked, his voice shaky. That made the Midwestern states glance at each other nervously. If the union split apart, how many of them would actually be able to handle it? What would happen if they couldn't handle it? The answer to that question dwelled in their minds, a terrifying and horrible thought. Luckily for them, however, their conversation was interrupted by a certain shaking

female state.

Did I say luckily? My bad, I meant unluckily.

The once cheerful Hawaii interrupted them with tears in her eyes. Not to mention the flower that she always had tucked behind her ear was nowhere to be found. "Hawaii?" Cali asked, kneeling down to look at Hawaii in the eyes, "What's wrong? Why are you crying?"

Hawaii sniffled a little bit and stuttered, "I... M-me and Alaska... W-we've-" A small sob racked her body before she hesitantly lifted her hand and showed it to her elder sister.

California gasped at the sight and put a hand to her mouth.

"Y-you're cracking..."

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"I thought we didn't crack!" North Carolina yelled once California told all of the thirteen colonies about Hawaii and Alaska. It turns out three of the territories have cracks, too.

"Well, I didn't think so either until just now!" California shot back. "How was I supposed to know?! This didn't happen last time!"

"Okay, everyone just calm down! This time is different, there must be a reason." South Carolina reasoned, putting her hand lightly on North Carolina's shoulder. Her hand was quickly shaken off, though.

New Hampshire nervously asked, "How big are the cracks currently?"

"Tiny, but they're obvious enough," California responded, trying to shove away her anger and worry.

"Damn it..." North Carolina muttered under his breath, "How long do they have left?"

"I don't know... At best, maybe a little over a month? It took this long for them to show up in the first place, after all."

Silence greeted Cali. A month. Was that really all they had until their siblings... No one wanted to think about it, nor did they truly know. What would happen when they cracked completely? Would they stay like that? Would they just be forced into the real world? Would they... die? A shudder passed through Cali at the thought, that was the last thing she ever wanted.

After a few moments of uncomfortable silence, Maryland spoke up, her foot tapping nervously on the floor, "So what can we do about it? We can't just stand here and do nothing..." She trailed off, silence greeting her as her eyes glanced nervously around the room. "Is that really all we can do?" She asked, her voice laced with unimaginable sorrow.

Delaware clenched his fist, looking like he wanted to cry and punch something at the same time, "What is there left to do?"

North Carolina stood up suddenly and yelled at Delaware, "You know *damn* well we have another option! One life for all of us, how hard can it be?!"

In a split second, Massachusetts rushed to North Carolina and, just like that, Massachusetts slapped his brother in the face. *Hard*. "Don't you *dare* think about sacrificing Rhi," On closer inspection, California noticed that Massachusetts had tears threatening to leave his eyes.

North Carolina raised a hand to his stinging cheek and scowled, "I don't want her dead either... but," North Carolina glared at Massachusetts, "if sacrificing her means that the rest of our siblings get to live, I know she would sacrifice herself without the slightest hesitation- that's just how that fun-sized numbskull is. And... I don't want to take the chance that we might die if we split. I don't want to take the chance that *Dad* might die," North Carolina gritted his teeth and clenched his fists. This was obviously a hard decision for him. No, scrap that, an *impossible* decision. Who could opt for sacrificing their siblings with a straight face?

Don't answer that.

After calming himself down a little, North Carolina's sad but determined gaze raked across the room. Without the slightest bit of hesitation, he turned on his heel and left, slamming the door behind him.

After a moment's hesitation, South Carolina stood up to follow him, pausing at the door. "North can be dumb and hot-headed sometimes, but he has a point," She turned her head to look at her siblings. "I love Rhi so, so much, but... I don't want to see the rest of my siblings dead on the floor," She choked out a small sob and, with tears streaming down her face, she hurried off after her brother.

After a few moments of tense waiting, no one else joined their siblings.

Massachusetts fell down onto a chair behind him, shocked by what his siblings just said.

"United we stand, divided we fall..." Connecticut quoted faintly, but Cali didn't turn to look at him, she just felt shocked by what her older siblings just said like Massachusetts.

Massachusetts looked up at his siblings and, with a hopeless look that tore Cali's heart out, stated bleakly:

"Then we have already fallen,"

--x--

PR observed as Confederacy practically tortured their father. Despite all the anger he let fester in his heart, he felt a pang of sadness when he saw his father so sad and broken. He glanced towards his sister and felt his heart lurch. He didn't like how... emotionless she looked. PR knew that Rhode Island's expressionless state was his doing, but it irked him that someone so cheerful the day before was now just an empty shell. He could hear her laugh echoing in his head.

He clenched his fists harder.

No more laughter, PR didn't want laughter from those who don't care about him even though he thought they did. Gradually, the joyous laughter echoing in his brain turned into malicious cackling, mocking him and everything he does. PR hated it. Hated *them*. He was never enough for that 'family' no matter what he did. He had ignored that fact for years, but *the incident* forced him to open his eyes and see the truth.

PR doesn't want to be in a family that doesn't care about him- has never cared about him. But even so, PR couldn't stop himself from caring about them no matter what he did, and PR hated that. PR hated everything about them. What did they have that he didn't? What made them so special? Why does Dad always care about them more than he ever did for PR?!

Why...?

Why was PR left to be nothing more than an afterthought, a slight rustle in the wind?

Now they are calling him a traitor, acting as though they hadn't betrayed their own family before.

PR wasn't the first one to realize how broken their family was- how could he ignore the signs? It wasn't his first toxic family, after all. PR quickly shook the memories starting to surface in mind away, he didn't want to think about those times. That family had been broken, too. But it was so much more broken that PR didn't see this family as broken until recently. That time was so hopeful, when he was first accepted into the union. He remembered being so unbelievably happy, but now that happiness was long gone.

Their broken family is why he and Confederacy worked together. Confederacy was weak and fading when they first came into contact, but PR helped him grow more powerful- so powerful that they could make a difference together. PR built the foundations and is still building the foundations for a new family that would actually care about him for once.

He didn't care what he had to do.

He didn't care who he'd have to hurt.

He spent so long being trapped, and now he'll finally be free from them, the neglection, the pain he'd tried so hard to forget- everything.

All he had to do now was wait.

Wait for his Dad to die.

...

...

It's a lot easier said than done.

Ch 21: ... Maybe Love Isn't So Bad After All \ / The Budding Feelings

[image]

Russia sat in his office in Moscow, sipping from a glass of vodka. Russia was filling out papers right now, or at least he was trying to. Normally he would be diligent and focused when it came to work, but for the past week he's been an utter and complete mess.

To clarify, it's only been about a week since Russia left New York. Ever since then, Russia couldn't stop his mind from wandering, but Russia hated where it always ended up. His train of thought always went the same way, and Russia was seriously hoping that this wasn't some sort of sign.

But even as Russia sat down trying to focus on his work, his mind started wandering again. His mind flew to the meeting, how he and America made up, how Ukraine was being stupid and suggesting they were a couple-

Speaking of which, a more recent memory flew to his brain when he thought of Ukraine. It was when Russia dropped Ukraine off in Kyiv after the meeting in New York.

~~-~~

Russia stepped off the plane with his brother, Ukraine. He would say goodbye to his brother, and then drop Belarus off before going to Moscow himself. Belarus would normally be with them to help send off Ukraine, but she was sleeping and Russia didn't want to wake her up.

Ukraine smugly walked off the plane, turning around and giving Russia a shit-eating grin. Russia immediately felt suspicious. If Ukraine looked this *proud, then that means that Ukraine thinks he has something on Russia.*

Russia's mind flew to any dirt Ukraine might have on him because, knowing his brother, Ukraine would shove it into Russia's face later in the form of some stupid comeback, usually during meetings for optimal embarrassment.

God, Russia hated Ukraine. They were brothers and they cared for each other, sure, but sometimes Ukraine can be a little shit.

Scrap that, Ukraine is always a piece of shit.

But that's besides the point! Russia cares for his brother and for his entire family way too much. He would never abandon them, especially not for something as silly as Ukraine's comebacks. Even so, Russia's pretty sure Ukraine doesn't feel the same. Russia isn't an idiot. Russia noticed that Ukraine really wants to leave their family. He wants to be his own boss and forget the past like the Baltics already have. He wants more freedom and more opportunity than what his family could ever give him. As Russia tried to keep his facial expression neutral while looking at his brother, Russia realized that this might be the very last time he brought Ukraine to Kyiv after a meeting. That realization hurt more than Russia expected it would.

But that's in the future. For now, Russia had to wait for Ukraine to spill his tea. Or to just stop being a little shit. Scrap that, the latter is impossible.

After a few more moments of Ukraine's smugness, Ukraine asked, "So, what's your opinion on America?"

Russia felt a familiar burning sensation creep onto his cheeks but he quickly pushed it down. Russia cleared his throat and smirked, "He's a good comrade, less- how do I phrase this-" Russia twirled his hand around in mock thought, "- less like your arrogant ass."

Ukraine paused for a moment, clearly not expecting that, then burst out laughing, "I'll admit, you got me there." Now it was Russia who had the smug smile. Ukraine looked at his brother and his gaze softened, a small, genuine smile creeping onto his face, "At first, I just thought that Japan had influenced me too much but... I've seen the way you look at the American and how you react when I make comments about you guys." Ukraine tilted his head a little, "You really do like him, don't

you?"

*Russia stared at Ukraine and felt the burning sensation build up on his cheeks, before forcibly dead-panning, " нет ." **(No.)***

Ukraine laughed, "I had forgotten how good you were at faking expressions!" Ukraine put his hands up in the air jokingly, "Don't worry, I won't tell anyone about your crush~" Ukraine wiggled his eyebrows in a playful manner, earning a sharp glare from Russia. Ukraine simply laughed in response, turning around fancifully and walking away while waving. After a few moments, Ukraine paused to glance back at his brother with a smile, "Just.." He started, "Just give this a chance, okay? Give him a chance... Give yourself a chance. I have a feeling that if you wait on this one, you may regret it in the future... But that's just a feeling I have."

Russia let his gaze soften as his brother turned around once again, heading towards an entourage of Ukrainian guards. Russia looked at his hands and milled over the thought in his head, before pushing it aside, ignoring the burning sensation in his face.

His father would never approve.

He couldn't like America, he just couldn't.

~~-~~

Russia felt the burning sensation on his cheek again. Recently he discovered he was probably blushing, which deteriorated his pride even further that he had blushed around his brother when talking about America multiple times.

Even though that memory was located a little over a week in the past, Russia found that he still agreed with his past self. He couldn't like America, no matter how much his own body betrayed him. America was loud, way too confident, a smartass, couldn't keep his shit together, emotionally erratic, not to mention he keeps secrets for no reason whatsoever.

But as Russia listed all the things he didn't like about America, he found that another side of his brain contradicted with his main line

of thoughts.

America is childish. *He's adorable when he is.*

America is stubborn. *But always for what he believes is right, he's a good guy.*

America is a lazy ass. *Not always. Plus, that's only in the mornings when he looks cute all messy in pajamas.*

America's overly cheerful. *Always manages to make every day happy, make me happy.*

America's a lightweight. *Hey, that's not a bad trait to have.* Shut upppp.

First, Russia couldn't escape Ukraine pointing this stupid stuff out for him, and now his own brain is deceiving him!

"You really like him, don't you?" Ukraine's words suddenly popped into Russia's head, and he found himself blushing like crazy even though he shouldn't be.

And even though Russia hated to admit it, Russia thought he finally found the answer to that question. Every imperfection America had, Russia loved. He just loved America, the good and the bad. He loved America's smile, and how consistently happy he was. He loved how he was stubborn and commonly fought with people, but he was only like that when he believed that what he was doing was right. He loved how, no matter what, America tried his best to stay himself.

As Russia's blush practically cooked Russia's face, Russia finally found it in his heart to say, "Дерьмо, I love him." **(Crap)**

After finally admitting that fact to himself, Russia felt himself smile and felt a giddy happiness overwhelming him. Maybe love- as well as America- isn't that bad after all.

But as Russia sat there, he felt worry fill his heart. America *tried* his best to stay himself. Russia isn't ignorant. How could he be, when it came to the man his heart chose to love? Something was bothering

America, something that was slowly but surely wiping the amazingly beautiful smile that shone off of his candy cane face.

Russia didn't know what was happening really, but Russia feared that when the UN meeting started up again in three weeks, America wouldn't be the same.

That Russia might lose the America he loves with all his heart before Russia could even admit that he has feelings for the dork.

'Please, universe, don't let him leave me.'

~~~~

Hello! I am back and, as promised, I have a surprise for you all!

I just published a new rusame story on Wattpad, and two chapters are currently up on it! It's called "An Irregular Heartbeat" and it should be a lot faster in pace story-wise.

That's all! Have a great day!

-Selva
~~~~

Ch 22: Watching From Afar \\ The Reunification

[image]

Russia checked to make sure he had brought all of the stuff he would need one last time. Today was the day, after all. The day Russia would go back to New York and hopefully see Ame. He was excited and terrified and excited and... you get the point. Russia was excited to see America, even though he felt like a child admitting that to himself. Russia has verified that he likes America a lot, but for the past few weeks, he's also been consistently and stubbornly ignoring his own feelings for the smaller country. It's confusing and Russia should really stop because it's obvious he's crushing really hard, but I mean whatever floats his Slavic boat. Russia was also terrified, though. That lingering thought that something was up with America kept on popping in Russia's totally gay mind. Honestly, Russia was terrified that America might've changed. Or that America didn't think they were friends anymore. Or that America-

Ok, Russia needs to stop being stubborn and worrying himself to death.

...

At first, this whole love thing seemed nice. Russia had heard stories of it and it truly seemed like a dream come true. But, Russia had become scared of this new and unfamiliar emotion quickly after he realized it was there in the first place.

Love terrified him.

And Russia wanted to pull his heart back into its loveless corner. Though Russia would never admit this to anyone, he fears that if he invests his heart into America- someone he couldn't even have a decent conversation with a month ago- his heart will end up broken. He's scared because of how quickly he fell in love in the

first place- how his heart just jumped straight into it. Russia wasn't an improvisational, careless person by any means. He never did anything without a plan if he had time to make one. He's scared that he might get hurt or- even worse- that America might get hurt because of Russia's stupid feelings. That's the last thing Russia wanted.

Russia's terrified that he could love someone so much in the first place. He didn't know he could. He knew deep down inside that if America needed help, he would drop everything he was doing to be there. To help him out, to comfort him. It was so gay and so very scary.

So, Russia created a plan recently. He would box up his feelings in the safest, most secure location in his heart so that Russia wouldn't hurt himself or America by having them. Russia had already tried getting rid of them, and quickly realized that his heart is its own boss- it won't listen to Russia no matter how much he begs. So, this was the next best thing: hide them. Russia loved America, but America could never, ever know. He wouldn't be able to take rejection. Russia would love America from afar. That was his only solution. He'll friendzone himself and be the best damn friend that stubborn dork has ever had.

There'll be no room for a relationship in Russia's grand plan, but that's okay. Russia can wait. As long as it kept his heart intact, as long as it limited these stupid, scary, amazing emotions from ever being shown, and as long as Russia could still see America smile, Russia could wait for a million years and a million more.

He would be okay; and maybe one day in the distant future when Russia's finally figured out all these confusing emotions and become a braver country, he could finally go up to America and say the words, "I love you."

...

Until then, Russia's scared.

Until then, Russia will wait, his heart forever pounding in his chest and reminding him of what it's like to love.

--x--

Russia smiled as his sister Belarus clambered onto Russia's plane. When she saw her brother, she brightened and immediately ran to hug him. "I haven't seen you in forever, you tree!" She exclaimed, smiling widely.

"Nice to see you again, Bela," Russia smiled down at his sister, gesturing for her to sit down on one of the private planes many seats, "Come on, let's talk while sitting down so the plane can actually move, yes?"

Bela laughed, sitting down, "Sounds good," After a few minutes of small talk she looked at a screen telling them where they were and frowned, "Wait, why are we going in the wrong direction?"

Russia gave Bela a confused look and looked at the screen himself. No, they were going in the right direction, "I don't know what you're talking about, Bela. We're going in the right direction."

"But this can't be right! Why aren't we heading towards Kyiv to pick Ukraine up?"

Oh.

Oh.

Russia pursed his lips and looked away, unconsciously squeezing his hand in and out of a fist, "About that..." But Russia's mouth with dry, refusing to say the words that needed to be said. How could Russia ever phrase this?

Belarus looked at her brother in confusion for a few more seconds until her eyes widened into realization. She spoke, her voice shaky and sad, "He's not... He's not coming with us this year, is he?"

Russia tersely nodded, feeling horrible. Ukraine had called him the week before and basically said that he didn't want to come with them this year and that he'd be fine on his own. Even though Russia saw it coming and knew that Ukraine wasn't trying to hurt him or the rest of their family, Russia still felt hurt and a little less wanted. He knew that his family loved him, but he couldn't ignore Ukraine's

frantic attempts to distance himself from his family. Or, to be more specific, Ukraine's attempts to distance himself from Russia. Russia wasn't an idiot, but sometimes he wished he was. Sometimes he wished he could have the obliviousness he had as a child, or maybe even America's ability to smile through any situation. That dork.

"Why is our family practically falling apart at the seams?" Bela asked, falling back onto her chair with a heart-shattering look on her face.

Russia frowned, looking away once again, "I don't know, Bela, I just don't know." That was a lie. He did, but Bela didn't need that reason right now. Russia had a feeling she already knew why and was denying it. Forcing her to accept the truth wouldn't do anything but distance them.

Bela gave Russia a sorrowful look, "I just- I'm gonna go to the bathroom..." She trailed off, quickly standing up and heading to the front of the plane where the bathrooms were.

Russia watched her walk off, sorrow starting to build up in his heart. All Russia did on the outside, however, was frown grimly. He would not- NOT- let any tears form in his eyes.

Slavs don't cry.

But Russia would be lying if he said he didn't want to as he was left all alone, with only his thoughts and endless worries to accompany him.

Slavs don't get lonely.

So, even though he'd been trying not to, Russia thought about America and his plan, no longer feeling as lonely. He felt his feelings bubble up and allowed them to quietly dwell in his heart. He felt his fear rise up, too, but that was quickly calmed. With his plan, Russia would be fine. With his plan, Russia had no need to be afraid.

With his plan, everything would be okay and no one would be hurt.

--x--

Once the private plane landed in New York, both Bela and Russia acted as though their conversation on the plane didn't happen. They simply headed off the plane, had some small talk, and got their driver, courtesy of the UN, to drive them to the hotel. Russia wasn't really that surprised when he noticed it was a different hotel than last time. America never planned these things consistently. This hotel looked much fancier than the other one. Plus, it was closer to the UN's headquarters. Russia didn't care enough to catch the hotel's name, though. He only had one thought flying through his brain.

America.

Russia needed to check up on him. Set his plan into motion, make sure America is ok, catch up with what happened over the past month, hang out, be gay while also suppressing the gay, and a lot more. Russia had promised to himself they would just be friends, and he was sticking to that; but, he also promised he would be America's best friend ever, so might as well get started on that early, right?

Russia went to Bela's and his shared suite- Russia finally knew the word for it and he was unreasonably proud- and claimed his room, chucking his suitcase on the bed with ease. It's not like he had many valuables in there other than a few vodkas he'd smuggled, so he could chuck it all he wants. Russia quickly unpacked, stashing his vodka away for a later date and putting his clothes away. He'd be staying in New York for a week, might as well be comfortable. Once all of Russia's stuff was unpacked, Russia was ready to find the dork. His dork.

Russia told Bela he was going out and walked out of his suite, making sure he didn't forget his keycard. He was walking down the hallways, trying to find a certain starry man when he saw someone he honestly didn't really want to see right now: Ukraine. Russia doesn't hate Ukraine by any means, but the whole plane thing still hurt.

Ukraine was talking to a certain red and white country. He was America's brother, Maple Weed. Wait, no, that's not his name. What was his name again? Maple Tree? No, that isn't it. Caninator? No, what idiot would name someone that? Canadia? Oh! Russia's

getting close, that sounded pretty right. Canaida? Cainada? Canada? That's it! Canada. The way-too-apologetic country Ukraine had been crushing on until they actually become a thing, which was very surprising in Russia's eyes. Still is.

Even though Russia didn't want to go up and talk to them, Russia also knew that, as America's brother, Canada would probably know where the dork is. Russia walked up to the two love-birds, already feeling awkward. Welp, here goes nothing.

"Привет, Canada, Ukraine, **(Hello)**" Russia said, nodding to them both respectively.

Canada turned to Russia and smiled while Ukraine gave Russia an annoyed expression for interrupting their conversation. Yeah, Ukraine, Russia knows he's a dick, don't be a dick about it. Sheesh.

Canada was the first one to speak of the two, "Hello, Russia! It's nice to see you. Do you need anything?"

"Yeah, actually." Russia admitted, "Do you know where your brother- er, America- is?"

Canada thought to himself for a moment before smiling and nodding, "Yep! He's at the UN Headquarters overseeing preparations for the meetings right now."

Ah, of course. The UN meetings are always hosted in his country, after all. Russia should've thought of that. "Thanks," Russia said, nodding and walking away towards the front of the hotel. He went into the front and managed to catch a driver hired by UN before she left to grab another country arriving from the airport. Russia asked her to drive him to the UN Headquarters. She gave Russia a questioning look before shrugging and heading inside her car, inviting him inside and driving them both to the Headquarters. Once they arrived at the building, she got out of the car to help Russia out, but he was long gone, already gone to search for America. She shrugged and got out her phone, reckoning she'd have to wait for the country to come back so that he could go back to the hotel.

Meanwhile, Russia was already walking around the building, trying to find America. As the good friend Russia will be, he's gonna make sure America's okay. The last time they saw each other, America wasn't in the best shape, and Russia had to make sure he was okay, otherwise, his heart will go crazy worrying.

First, Russia stopped at the meeting room they used last month. He headed inside and noticed how it was completely and utterly empty. It looked nice, but there was no America in sight. He must be prepping in a different room. Russia left the meeting room and continued to check nearby rooms.

As Russia was trying to hunt America down, he ran into NATO in the hallways. Originally, Russia was going to ignore NATO and hope NATO did the same, until Russia stopped to reason with himself. This was NATO, for Pete's sake! Of course NATO would know where the heck America is!

'*But, uh, how do I approach an alliance that was practically made to counter me?'* Russia thought to himself. *'Actually, I don't think I care right now.'*

Russia walked up to NATO and NATO immediately gave him a suspicious stare.

"Привет, NATO." Russia started, keeping his face as neutral as possible, "Do you know where America is? I need to talk to him."

NATO gave Russia another look, narrowing his eyes, before gruffly saying, "He's in room 220 with UN, second floor."

"Thanks," And Russia was off towards the elevator. He was so close. He was so very close.

The minute Russia was outside room 220, he accidentally slammed the door open. Great job, Russia. America, as NATO said, was in the room with UN, his back facing Russia. His signature sunglasses were on, he was wearing a suit, and he was holding a clipboard with a pen. At the sudden sound of Russia's entrance, America jumped, accidentally dropping his clipboard on the floor. The clipboard clattering on the floor was the only sound interrupting the silence

that had ensued in the room. America quickly snatched his clipboard and turned around to see Russia.

Russia felt himself smile, a warm feeling in his chest reminding him how much he irrationally loved the dork in front of him. Russia inwardly sighed, America was okay. He was fine, at least Russia thought so. His worries that America changed during the past month quickly vanished, replaced by relief.

America blinked for a few seconds, mentally registering the fact that the crazy Slav who just slammed the door open was, in fact, Russia. Once that fact dawned on the stars-and-stripes, he smiled and waved at Russia.

"Oh, hey, Russ!"

Russia smiled wider and started walking towards America. He was about to say something, but then he realized something.

Russia's heart immediately dropped and his worries flooded back in. Last month, Russia wouldn't have been able to recognize it, but he most certainly could now. He loved America, after all.

And his heart knew... it knew that America's smile...

...was fake.

Ch 23: Thank you \\ The Tears

Russia didn't know why that had popped into his mind, but as the thought repeated itself into Russia's mind, the more Russia could see the signs that the thought was true. Though Russia couldn't see America's eyes due to his sunglasses. But the way America held himself- his posture, everything- it felt wrong somehow. Russia knew the way America held himself: confident and challenging. But this... this wasn't it. Russia couldn't describe it correctly even if he tried. It was just wrong somehow. Scared, empty. Like there was supposed to be personality there but there wasn't any.

Russia needed to talk to America about this. Whatever was going on, Russia wanted to help. He wanted to be there for it, to help America with it. But he couldn't rat America out in front of UN. If he did, Russia was 100% sure that America wouldn't be truthful with his answer. They needed to talk privately.

"Hi, Meri!" Russia smiled at America, realizing he hadn't responded to America earlier, "Could we talk in private real quick?"

America shot Russia a questioning glance, before smiling and responding, "Sure, I just have to give something to UN first."

America walked up to UN and pulled something out of his pocket. America handed UN a sealed envelope. Russia asked himself why the heck America would need to give UN that, but quickly brushed it off as some sort of signed paper.

America lowered his voice so that only UN could hear, "Keep this safe for me, ok?"

UN immediately shot America a confused look, "What do you mean by that?"

America simply smiled and answered vaguely, "Exactly as I said. Just keep it safe."

UN immediately shot Russia a confused glance even though Russia couldn't hear a word America said. In fact, UN's confused look only made Russia nervous about what the heck they were talking about in the first place. Russia scolded himself. It wasn't any of his business, it's not like he's America's boyfriend or anything.

... Even though he really wants to be.

America turned around, still smiling, "Okay Russ, let's go talk."

Russia was about to protest and ask what the heck just happened, but America grabbed him by the arm before he could and, with strength Russia didn't expect, dragged Russia to a nearby room. The room they entered had a conference table in the center with lots of chairs surrounding it. There was also a window with a blue curtain. America walked towards the window, turning towards Russia once he reached it.

"So, what's up, Russ? Do you need help with something, or was this just an excuse to talk?"

Russia frowned and walked in front of America, getting straight to the point, "What's wrong, America? You can tell me."

Worry and Confusion flashed on America's face for a split second before being replaced with another million-dollar smile. That split second was all Russia needed to confirm he was right. Something *was* wrong, and America was hiding it. Again. Was this the same problem America was having last month? Had America been struggling with this problem for a month without bothering to tell anyone?

America simply waved Russia's worry off, however, "Nothing's wrong, Russia! You're worrying too much about me." America separated himself from the window and started walking around the room, obviously avoiding eye contact.

Russia felt worry and frustration build up inside of him. Why would America hide something that's obviously bothering him? Why didn't he think it was okay to talk about it? "Meri!" Russia accidentally shouted. He didn't mean to be so loud, but his voice unintentionally

followed Russia's emotions.

America jumped a little at Russia's yell and turned to see Russia with a frustrated expression on his face. America stayed silent, unsure of what to say. After a few moments of Russia forcing his frustration away so that he could focus on helping America, Russia's expression softened, "Please, tell me. I can tell that something's wrong. I swear I won't tell anyone about it if you don't want me to; but, please, I just want to know what's wrong."

Conflict flickered on America's face for a moment before he smiled, his mind made up, "Nothing's wrong Russia, I just have a lot of work to do and that's kind of stressing me out- I'm trying to make this meeting special." America continued walking around the room.

"Why are you trying to make this meeting special?"

Meri looked back for a split second, another smile on his face. America was smiling a little too much today and it made Russia feel uneasy, "Why not?"

Russia narrowed his eyes, suspicious. He could either play along and try to ask America again later, or he can continue to ask America while in this room. Russia sighed, choosing the former. For now, he'll play along so that he could get answers later. "Okay, why don't I help you with the preparations then? I want to help out so that you aren't as stressed."

America started walking towards the door, facing away from Russia. "Thanks, Russia," America said as he exited the room. The door closed behind him.

"You're welcome...?" Russia sighed, his suspicions growing. He glanced around the room. What was wrong? That question was eating Russia up inside. He wanted to know and help so badly, but America wouldn't let him. How could Russia let America know that it was okay to let others know and help? How could Russia help America even though he doesn't know what's wrong?

Russia looked down at his hand and felt an idea form in his mind. America's gloves. If Russia could find and figure out a piece of the

puzzle, then the rest shouldn't be that hard to find and put into place, right?

Russia smiled to himself.

He knew a co-detective that would be perfect for the job.

--x--

France walked down the hallways of the hotel with her husband, UK. They were looking for their room because they had been staying at Australia's for the past two days as some sort of family meet up. Unfortunately for them, Aussie's alligator was acting up, causing them all to be a little late. It didn't really matter, though, because today was a Saturday and the meetings don't start until Monday.

"Honey! I found our room."

France turned and smiled at her husband, placing her luggage down in front of their shared suite. France used her key card to open the door and propped it open with a piece of her luggage. France let her husband inside first and was about to carry her stuff inside as well when she saw a certain Slavic country speed walking towards her. She snorted and called out to her husband, "Is it just me, cher, or is there a crazy Russian heading this way? **(Dear)**"

UK peeked out of their room and laughed as well, "No, honey, I don't think it's just you. I'll get our stuff packed while you talk to him, okay?" UK grabbed France's luggage.

"Thank you, baguette," France responded, snorting at the nickname. When UK learned about the stereotype that French people are obsessed with baguettes, he insisted on being called "baguette" every once and a while to show that he was, well, France's special baguette. It was stupid, but France loved him for it.

"No problem, honey," UK kissed France lightly on the cheek. France waved him off, laughing. UK smiled and hauled the luggage inside of their suite.

France turned to see Russia finally arrive in front of her, "Hello,

Russie. **(Russia)** Do you need anything?"

Russia nodded, "Could we talk about something?"

"I'm all ears," France smiled at Russia.

"I mean, in private."

France gave Russia a questioning look before gesturing him to go inside. They both went inside the suite. France glanced around, but her husband was nowhere to be seen. He was probably already inside one of the bedrooms unpacking their stuff. Russia sat down in a chair and France did the same. France was the first one to break the silence.

"What's going on, Russie **(Russia)**? It must be something serious..."

Russia sighed and started rambling about his story. He spilled that he thinks that whatever was happening a month ago is still going on and that it's probably only gotten worse. He also talked about how suspicious America has been lately: how he gave UN a weird envelope today, how his smiles seem fake and forced, and his big, uncalled for preparations for the meeting. Once Russia was finally done rambling and expressing his worries, he slumped back on his chair.

France frowned, "What can I do to help?" She didn't like the thought of her child struggling with something and not getting help. Even if America doesn't want it, France will give him all the mothering in the world.

Russia smiled, glad he could get France's help. He leaned forward and started speaking, "Okay, I have a plan..."

--x--

Russia stood outside of the hotel with Germany, Aussie, and maple weed man. Or, Canada. Russia stood there, hoping that France did her part. Russia did his part of the plan by convincing Aussie, Poland, Germany, and Canada to come with, now France had to do her part by getting America to join them. But Russia should seriously learn that France never disappoints. As promised, Russia

saw America exit the hotel, waving at the group waiting for him. Once he got close enough, he said, "Hey guys! So, what are we doing?"

"We're going to walk around the city and, as much I don't like the lack of planning, we're doing whatever we like around the city," Germany responded.

"Cool! Let's go then."

Almost the minute they started walking around the city, Poland and Aussie got into a really heated argument about alcohol. It started out a little something like this.

"I don't know about you, mates, but I could defeat Canada in a drinking contest any day."

Poland raised an eyebrow, "That's hardly an accomplishment because Canada never drinks. If you could easily beat Canada, I could easily beat you."

"Is that a challenge?"

Poland smirked, "Maybe for you it is, but it's hardly a challenge for me."

And they continued arguing. Even though Poland may seem sweet at first, he will cuss you out, no hesitation. In fact, Russia was kind of surprised that Poland hadn't cussed Aussie out yet. After a little while, Russia just learned to tune the two bickering countries out. After stopping at various places, it was already starting to get late and the TWO WERE STILL ARGUING. It was honestly kind of funny how stubborn they were. When they turned the corner, heading back to the hotel, Aussie spotted a bar. Bingo.

"Okay, since you keep on insisting that you can handle more drinks than me, we're gonna have a drinking contest in that bar right now!" Aussie challenged.

"Bet, Australijska kurwa **(Aussie Fuck)**," Poland responded, entering the bar and immediately ordering the strongest thing they had for the both of them.

Russia couldn't help but smile. His plan could finally get into motion. Russia turned to Germany, America, and Canada. "Want to get some drinks?"

Canada looked like he was about to object, but before he could America dragged him inside playfully. Germany and Russia, as usual, ordered a beer and vodka respectively. Poland and Aussie were already chugging whatever the heck they ordered. Canada ordered a soda while America decided to order a beer as well.

At the end of their contest, Poland won. Aussie became pretty wasted after two bottles of whatever the heck they gave him, which was pretty surprising. It must've been pretty strong. Poland managed to drink four and, also to Russia's pleasant surprise, became rowdier and cussed more when he was drunk, which was hilarious to watch. But Russia wasn't waiting for them to be drunk, he was waiting for America to get drunk so that he could extract information for his plan.

Speaking of which, America hadn't drunk much at all. Russia nudged him in the side, "Are you gonna drink that or contemplate your life choices?"

America chuckled and imitated what Australia said earlier, "Is that a challenge?"

"You know me so well."

America rolled his eyes and drank half of his beer in one go, "There. Happy, Russ?"

"Very."

America laughed and continued to take smaller sips from his drink. It didn't take too long for the lightweight to become drunk. Russia could hear him mumbling drunkenly into the table. With Aussie incredibly wasted, Canada started heading out, carrying his little brother. When Canada saw America wasted too, he sighed and looked at Russia, "Do you think you could take him to his hotel room for me? I'm a little busy with a drunk younger brother right now."

Russia nodded, this was going a little too smoothly.

"Thanks, do you know his room number?" Canada asked.

"Yeah, he told me earlier," Russia lied. France was the one who called him earlier and told him America's hotel room number. That French woman works miracles and Russia isn't sure how.

Canada nodded and practically dragged his brother out of the room. Russia turned to America, only to find America not there. Sudden panic shot through Russia. America was right there! Where had he gone? Russia's eyes carefully scanned the bar until he saw America talking to a few people. Correction: flirting with a few people. Russia sighed, feeling jealousy creep in. God, of course America was flirting. Russia quickly walked up to America and yanked him back to their bar seats before Russia could feel any more jealousy creep into his mind. Russia plopped America onto his seat, "God, I really need to keep an eye on you, don't I?"

America giggled, swaying in his seat, "I don't know Ruuusski I've had my eyes on youuu for awhile," America kept giggling as Russia's face started to get red. "Russsski's blushinggg,"

Nope, Russia couldn't deal with this. Scrap the plan, Russia couldn't handle being flustered like this. Russia immediately calmed himself down. No, he would just bring America to his apartment early, not scrap the plan. God, Russia needed to learn how to deal with this. Russia quickly picked up America, who was muttering and giggling that Russia was blushing, and said goodbye to Poland and Germany.

Russia called an uber and the uber drove them to the hotel. Russia carried America to his room and, luckily, America was conscious enough this time to give Russia his key card and let Russia open the door. America wiggled out of Russia's grasp, terrifying the Russian half to death because he probably wasn't sober enough to stand properly, and proceeded to collapse instantly on the nearby couch, giggling.

Russia felt guilty about it, but he really had to get the plan into motion now. He sat next to America on the couch, "Hey America?"

"Mmmmmm.... Call me Meri like you usually doooo," America protested, his voice muffled by the couch, "Whyyyy's the couch on my faceeee?"

Russia chuckled at America's drunkenness, "Your face is on the couch, silly. But Meri, can you please take off your gloves for me?"

There was a moment of hesitation, but then America responded, "Mmmmm no."

"Why?"

"My hands are ugly and probably bloodyyyy..."

"What?" Russia immediately looked at America's white gloves. Bloody hands? No way, those things were white and most definitely soak up blood. Russia grew concerned. What the heck did America mean by "bloody?"

"Whenever I look at my hands," America hiccuped, sitting up to look at his gloved hands, "he reminds me of how bloody they used to beeeee."

If Russia was concerned before, he was even more so now. Who was this he? What was he doing to America? "He?"

"C..." America paused as though he was thinking, "CPR."

Russia glanced at America's hands, he needed to know more, "Who's this CPR?"

America drunkenly shrugged, laying down on the bed again and twirling his fingers, obviously bored by the conversation, "Beats meeeee, hee just reminds me of how terrible I am."

Russia's eyebrows furrowed in anger, how terrible America was? No, America was an amazing person. Russia suddenly had an urge to slap whoever CPR was. America glanced at Russia's face and giggled at how mad he was. Russia immediately turned to him, his voice serious, "Do you believe him?"

America giggled again, as if that was a stupid question, "Yeah, cause

he's rriigggght," America laid down on the couch again, looking at the ceiling while chuckling, "I'm a pretty terrrrible person."

"Don't you *dare* say that ever again."

America glanced at Russia, slightly sobering at how mad and serious Russia sounded. America sat up and looked at Russia for a moment before feeling tears fall down his cheeks, "Whyyy? It's all my fault so many of my people have died in wars-"

America was silenced by Russia suddenly wrapping him into a warm hug, "Don't you dare blame yourself. Deaths in those circumstances are never your fault. That's just how war is... That's just how awful war is. Don't ever think that you're a terrible person because you're the most amazing person I know."

America instantly sobered up. He didn't know what to say, he wasn't even sure he could speak. He didn't expect to be told something so comforting. Heck, he didn't expect anyone to care about him or say he's not a terrible person... America didn't know how much he needed to hear those words until just now.

America felt a part of his brain resist and scream at him for feeling good even after so many have died because of him, but America let himself believe those sweet-sounding words. He had felt so numb recently, but that feeling was wiped away in moments just because of those words. Just because Russia cared.

Maybe, just this once, he could ignore the voices inside his head and let himself be happy. Just one night before he returned to the hell-hole he had gotten so used to.

With tears flowing down his cheeks, America hugged Russia back and cried into his shoulder. He felt happy. He no longer felt so alone and so hated. For that moment, America saw that he had one small reason to live left. America squeezed Russia tighter.

"T-thank you... thank you so much, Russia..."

Ch 24: A Blurry Figure \\ The Cruel Hope

America woke up with a groan. His head hurt like hell. He should really stop drinking, but hey, he had to somehow prove to the others he was okay. I suppose one good thing was that America couldn't remember having any nightmares, which is always a plus. But does he deserve freedom from that pain for a night? He deserves every bad dream he gets.

'Don't you dare say that again.'

America's eyes widened. A voice in his head? No, a memory. But... who said that? And when? Why? Surely, he couldn't have been told that last night? America felt fear creep up on him. Does someone know? Did he unknowingly blab? But, who? The fogginess of America's memories irritated him to no end. If someone knew, then... America felt like screaming. He wasn't supposed to drag anyone else into his mess, he was supposed to keep this all personal! And yet, he couldn't even manage that. He's so stupid, he can't do anything right.

'Don't you dare say that again.'

"Oh, shut up..." America said out loud. America quickly wiped away some tears that had begun to crawl down his cheeks, his anger fading away. Even though he didn't mean to pull this person into his mess, he felt a rush of happiness and gratitude. Was this what it felt like to feel important to someone?

America had almost forgotten the feeling in his past month of hell. America smiled to himself. Was this what it was like to feel happy again? America sighed, amazement and gratitude pounding through him. He had to figure out who said this to him, he needed to.

Because even though America's life has gone to shit, the foggy memory of this person is somehow making him feel happy and

wanted again.

Somehow, this unknown person is giving him a reason to live and, god, America really needs a reason to live right about now.

America's hand flew to his head, a horrible headache starting to pound in his head. Right, Hangover exists. He could deal with it though, he'd been getting a lot of headaches recently.

America sighed. No matter what came his way, he could deal with it. He had to deal with it. He had to, for the states. He had to be strong for them. He had to be strong....

Oh, who is he fooling here?

The world would be better off without him.

His *kids* would be better off without him.

In the end, I guess he's no more than a foolish monster.

--x--

Russia woke up to his alarm, quickly shutting it off. Once Russia was finally awake enough to think, his mind immediately flew to what happened last night. Russia frowned. Why was America, of all people, feeling that way? Had he always felt that way? Why didn't Russia notice sooner? It hurt Russia's heart. America believed with all his heart that he was a terrible person, even though Russia knew he wasn't. Hearing America say those things about himself... It made Russia react in ways he didn't know he could. He felt so angry and sad and protective all in the same moment. Oh, and Russia really wanted to slap CPR, whoever that is. Still does.

Russia sighed, changing the subject in his own head. Just the thought of what happened yesterday made Russia's blood boil. Even though Russia had gotten info- really heavy info at that- he hadn't gotten the information he wanted. The whole point of that was to get America drunk enough to take off his *damn* gloves and that, uh, didn't happen. If Russia could just figure out why America was hiding his hands, then Russia was sure everything else would click into place. In the end, Russia still had no idea what was wrong with

America's hands other than the fact they were apparently ugly and bloody- which makes no sense as it stands- and Russia was pretty sure he wouldn't get another chance to figure it out anytime soon.

Other than today, possibly. He did promise he would help America with preparations. Russia stood up, quickly getting ready. After eating a quick breakfast, Russia had someone drive him over to the UN Headquarters. He wasn't gonna go through the hassle of renting out a car again. Once Russia arrived at the Headquarters, he was just a little bit surprised to see America waiting outside the entrance, phone in hand.

America looked up from his phone, seeing that Russia had arrived. He smiled and gestured for Russia to come over. Russia smirked, deciding to act like he knew nothing since America probably didn't remember anything, "Nice suit."

"Yeah, yeah, I get that it wasn't necessary to be formal, but I felt like it, ok?" America replied quickly, frowning at Russia's smirk. They walked inside. Russia was about to start friendly conversation when America started talking about what they would do today, "Okay, so for the most part, this month I'm gonna have a buffet so that countries don't have to go out into the city and eat at restaurants if they don't want to, and UN wanted to do some renovations in some rooms, so we're doing that as well. Not to mention, we have to have everything cleaned by tomorrow." America handed Russia a few papers. "For the most part, we're going to be supervising all this stuff and make sure everything is going smoothly. Overseeing food and supply orders, making sure people aren't slacking off, etc." America smiled slightly, looking up at Russia, "Also, uh, thanks for volunteering to do this. I put too much on my plate and, uh, I don't think I'd be able to finish in time without your help. You didn't have to, so thanks."

Russia smiled, trying to stop himself from blushing, "It's really no problem. Plus, I wanted to help out, so it really isn't a problem."

America smiled, quickly hugging his taller friend, "Thank you." With a smile and a small wave, America headed down the hallway.

Russia was gonna follow him until he realized that they were

probably doing separate jobs. Russia looked down at the papers America gave him and quickly skimmed through what he'd have to do. So, he was supervising the renovations on the second floor first. Cool.

Once Russia got there, he made sure to check over everything that was happening and make things run smoothly. Since he was a country, he adjusted quickly and took charge. Once he made sure everything was running smoothly, he started to head over to the next thing he had to do which was to get the cleaning crew and make sure they know what they're doing. Russia went through a similar process and just started burning through the list. Surprisingly, he finished by noon. Russia walked down to the lobby and pulled out his phone. He was going to text America he was done, but then quickly realized he still doesn't have America's phone number. Russia clicked his tongue. He should probably ask for that sooner or later. But, before Russia had the chance to think about searching for America, Russia saw him walking down the hallway, talking to someone. The person America was talking to curtly nodded at whatever America said and walked out of the building.

America spotted Russia and smiled, walking up to him. "Hi, Russ! How's work going?"

"I finished already."

America looked at Russia, suddenly confused, "You-" America made a ton of incoherent, confused noises, "You what?! How?!"

Russia laughed, "It's simple, I made sure everything was running smoothly and then made the person working the best take over."

America facepalmed at himself, "You know- you'd think after 200 years of being a country, I'd be smart by now," Russia chuckled and America turned to look at him, saying, "I think this calls for a free lunch."

"Free for you or for me?"

"Y'know, the first option sounds *really* nice, are you sure?" America

joked.

"No."

"Damn it," America cursed under his breath, making Russia laugh.

They called over a driver, and both got into the car. America told the driver where they were going. For once, it wasn't McDonald's. When Russia gave America a questioning glance, America explained, "It's a really good restaurant in the city, so we're going."

"Woah, no McDonald's?" Russia joked and America scoffed.

"I'm not that obsessed."

"Mhm." America sharply turned towards Russia and made a really mad face. Russia held his hands up, "I'm joking, I promise!"

America's expression broke and he laughed a little bit because of how desperate Russia looked. He smiled and commented, "You better be."

Once they got there, they were sat down and Russia looked over the menu, already liking his options. Russia eventually ordered his food, interested in what it would taste like. After ordering, however, Russia finally noticed that America hadn't ordered anything. "Are you gonna eat something?" Russia asked.

America turned to look at Russia and quickly smiled, waving off the suggestion, "No, no, I'm okay. I already ate, I don't need to eat," Russia immediately felt suspicious. One, that lie made absolutely no sense, since Russia is a hundred percent sure America didn't eat before this since he was working. Two, what America said last night was still *very* fresh in Russia's mind. Why was America putting himself through this? What happened all those years ago was never his fault. Russia immediately felt the protectiveness from last night creep back into Russia's heart. Then, Russia realized something, his own face showing his worry plainly. It's not that America didn't need to eat, he just didn't want to eat. Why was he starving himself? Russia looked at America. Luckily, he didn't look too skinny, but Russia was suddenly afraid and nervous. He somehow

needed to convince America to eat.

"Well, I won't allow you to pay for my food if you don't eat too," Russia said, as it was the only thing he could think of on the spot.

America immediately became confused, "What? Are you joking? I promised I would pay as thanks," Once more glance at Russia's determined face told America all he needed to know, "Wait why are you serious- I don't- uh- what- but I don't- ughhhhhh," America's head thumped against the counter in defeat and Russia barely heard him whisper, "But I don't deserve it."

"Don't say that," Russia responded immediately. America looked up at him, getting serious deja vu. "As your friend-" The word had never tasted so bitter in Russia's mouth- "I can say that not eating isn't good for you. So, please, eat some food for me."

America paused, and even though Russia couldn't see it, his eyes started darting around the room in confusion and fear. Russia had heard him. Not only that but surely he wasn't- Could Russia really be-?

"C'mon, I promise it won't bite." Russia continued teasingly, trying to make the topic lighter so that he wouldn't stress out America.

"Screw you, too," America said, a smile creeping onto his face. And, because Russia insisted, America ordered his own food. They talked while they ate, and America could honestly say that he couldn't tell whether his smiles were fake or not. But, even so, Russia probably wasn't the blurry person from yesterday. America quickly shot down the thought Russia was and the cruel hope that had risen with it. Russia didn't know. Nobody did. And he probably didn't care either. If anything, he should be glad that a monster like him is getting what he deserves. America's thinking too hard into this. Heck, the foggy person lingering in America's memories was probably no more than something his stupid brain made up to torture himself even more! I mean, his hands always looked bloody when he looked at them now, so it was probably mental torture at this point!

But... if the blurry figure was another figment of his own cruel

imagination... why did he make America feel so worthwhile? And why does that foggy person remind America so much of Russia? Surely Russia isn't him...

But as America heard Russia start talking again, America's eyes widened.

It couldn't be... but it had to be. America put a hand to his mouth and tears formed in his eyes. Someone cared. Someone actually cared. This wasn't fake at all... because...

Russia's voice and the blurry figure's voice were the exact same.

Ch 25: Why do you care about me? \\ The Panic Attack

[image]

So @Zum12346 made an animation for my story (which is absolutely amazing). It was actually what motivated me to stop being lazy and write this chapter, so please watch it (I put it above) and send them love! And thank you so much for making it in the first place, Zum! I love you, no homo.

-Selva

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America's eyes widened. Their voices were the exact same. How didn't he notice it before? America glanced up at Russia and his face contorted into one of confusion and disbelief. Why did Russia care? America wasn't worth it. He never had been.

Russia, who had just been sitting there as America had this great revelation, was extremely confused. He didn't know why America had suddenly become deathly silent, but he did notice America's expression and that something big was going to happen. Even so, that didn't stop him from worrying about America. Hesitantly, he asked, "Hey, Meri? Are you okay?"

America's heard jerked up. America stared at Russia, his thoughts going at 100 miles per second. He had to ask Russia. He had to ask Russia if he *knew*. His eyes scanned the restaurant. There were too many people. But, there was an exit to the outside of the restaurant roughly on America's right. America stood up suddenly, startling Russia. America grabbed Russia's arm and dragged him outside. Once the light spring wind hit America, he turned around to look at an extremely confused Russia. Russia broke the silence first, "What's going on, America?"

America sucked in a deep breath. He looked up at Russia, forcing
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himself to look determined and strong. In reality, he was terrified. But Russia couldn't know that. "Do you know?" America questioned.

Russia looked confused by the question, "What?"

America felt himself get even more scared and emotional, "Do you know?!"

Russia paused for a moment upon seeing America's face, his fake smile long gone. Then it hit him. Oh. *Oh.* But even so, as Russia looked into America's eyes, he knew that America probably wasn't talking about what Russia thought he was talking about. There was something more. Something that America wanted to keep secret so badly that his happy facade had shattered under the weight of it being figured out. Russia feigned oblivion, "Know what?"

America, however, quickly caught onto Russia's fake act. Russia knew something, and it was driving America insane at what he might have heard when America was drunk. Russia shouldn't know, but if he did know, then- America felt something inside him *snap*. "You can't fool me. You know *exactly* what I'm talking about! My depression, my cracks-" America gasped at his own words and quickly put his hands over his mouth to stop himself from speaking any more. But it was far too late, Russia had heard him.

Russia's eyes widened in a mixture of disbelief and fear, "C-cracks?" His gaze flew to America's gloves. He remembered all too vividly how his dad cracked and eventually collapsed. *Hands crack first.* Russia didn't want to believe it, but he knew it was true. That was the reason why America was wearing gloves and had been wearing gloves *for the past month*.

America was cracking.

...Just like Russia's dad.

And since it's been months, he probably doesn't have that much longer until he shatters completely. Russia felt a lump form in his throat. He couldn't lose someone he loves, not again.

America started stuttering, his biggest secret had been found out,

"N-no, I-I- I'm not-"

"Don't you dare lie to me and tell me that you don't have cracks," Russia growled. America took a step back and Russia suddenly realized how threatening and harsh he was being. Russia calmed himself, and looked at America with a pleading gaze, "Please, it's okay. I can help."

Russia stepped forward, but America jerked back. America was conflicted, scared of what might happen next, and angry... so, so angry at how fate had pulled him like a puppet, making him unknowingly spill the one thing he could never, under any circumstances, reveal. America's anger took the wheel, "I don't need your help!"

"That's what *he* insisted too, and we both know how he ended up," Russia said, sorrow all too evident in his voice.

America was silenced by that line. *He* had always been a sore subject, but it had become far too sore as of late. Not only that, but America didn't like how desperate and sad Russia sounded and looked. Guilt started to weigh down on America's shoulders. Russia was giving America some space, but he was also just close enough to help if something bad suddenly happened to America. America felt even more guilt. Why did he mean so much to Russia? "No, I can't- I can't drag you into my mess, I can't hurt you," America protested.

"What makes you think you can hurt me?"

America couldn't help but notice that Russia looked like a protective and hurt puppy. America looked away in guilt, "I just will, I know I will. I always hurt people around me, that's all I'm good for," America turned to look at Russia, "See, I'm hurting you right now! And it's all my fault... I knew this would happen, I knew I would only burden people around me-"

"Please stop," Russia begged. He still looked like a hurt puppy. America couldn't look at him, the sight made his heart twist in guilt. He didn't want to hurt anyone, and yet he already has. America felt like a failure. Under the weight of his own guilt,

America went silent, feeling an unexplainable urge to run away. He didn't want to be here right now. After the silence had dragged on for far too long, America glanced nervously up at Russia. America paused. There was something in Russia's gaze. America wasn't quite sure what it was, but it made him feel safe. America didn't want to run away anymore. Russia spoke, his voice soft, "You could never burden me. Never. It's okay to get help, it's okay to have flaws, and you aren't hurting me, I promise."

'Liar.'

"But-" America started.

"No buts."

"I don't believe you," America blurted out.

"That's okay, but you really should believe in what I'm saying, because it's true," Russia responded.

"I don't like how calm you are right now," America gritted his teeth.

"That's okay too."

"I don't trust the nonsense that's spilling out of your mouth-"

"Then why do you trust the nonsense CPR says?" Russia interrupted, looking straight into America's eyes. America paused, suddenly feeling trapped.

"W-what?" America stuttered. ...CPR? Oh god. Russia knew about CPR. How much did he say yesterday when he was drunk? How many secrets did he reveal? How many secrets did Russia know and now hate him for? Oh, god, he's so stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid, *stupid*-

"Why do you trust what CPR says if you don't trust what I say?"

America looked up at Russia and moved his mouth, but no words came out. He didn't know the reason why... No, America knew, and it was a much bigger reason than not knowing. But, his thoughts refused to cooperate with him. Why *did* he trust CPR? Russia stayed

patient as America thought it through. America's eyes darted around nervously, terror building up inside of him, "I-I don't know, he's always been right and said the truth before, so he must be telling the truth now." America reasoned with himself, trying to prove to himself that CPR was right all along. America didn't notice himself start fidgeting with the cuffs of his gloves.

"Who says he's telling the truth now?" Russia questioned, sympathy in his eyes.

America stopped fidgeting with his gloves. Was CPR not telling the truth? No, no, no, CPR always tells the truth, especially the hard, tough-to-hear, cruel truth. CPR has always told the truth... America thought so, at least. But, really, how long has America known CPR? Does he really have America's best intentions in mind? He probably doesn't. No, he definitely doesn't. But, he's always right. He must be right. If he wasn't right, then...

As America was deep in thought, Russia started getting concerned. He didn't know what was happening and America had been spacing out for far too long. Concerned, Russia started reaching for America's hand to get the shorter country's attention.

But America was still stuck in the whirlwind of his own thoughts. He didn't know what to think, he didn't know how to think. America could vaguely hear Russia saying something, but he couldn't focus on the individual words. His head hurt like hell and his thoughts kept scampering away from him like how scared mice would run away from a hungry cat. America barely noticed Russia's hand reaching for his own until it was a mere few inches away. America's eyes flew to his hand and-

SLAP!

America jolted back, the sound reverberating in his skull and scattering his mice-like thoughts. America looked at his right hand in disbelief, seeing a faint red on his palm from the force of the blow. His hand hurt. But more importantly, his hand had slapped Russia's. He had slapped Russia's hand away. He had pushed Russia away. Again. America looked up at a surprised Russia and felt the world close in around him. He did that. *He* did that.

Oh god.

CPR was right. Why did America doubt CPR? CPR was right all along. All America can do is hurt those around him. Heck, that's all he's *ever* done. America felt tears pour down his cheeks and, before he could give Russia the opportunity to speak and say how awful he was for slapping him, ran away from Russia. He ran and ran and ran until the world around him became a panicked blur. America stopped running when he reached a small alleyway and slipped into it. The world around him ceased to exist. He was in a black void, all his guilt clawing at him like hungry lions clawing for their favorite, fresh meat.

America screwed his eyes shut and stumbled backwards, hitting the wall of the nearby building. He put his hands on his ears, as if that would protect him from the incessant clawing of his guilt and the screaming of his thoughts. His thoughts were fighting tooth and nail with each other, the two halves of his brain being split apart by the mental war.

Ripping and snapping,

Ripping and snapping.

America felt his legs go weak and he fell onto the cold, hard concrete pavement. It hurt, it hurt so much, but it didn't hurt nearly as much as his head did. America felt like screaming. So, he did. He screamed in fear, in terror, in pain, and in so many other feelings swirling in his head. He screamed and screamed and screamed and screamed and screamed until he didn't think he could scream any longer. He felt his throat start to close up, but he wasn't done, he wasn't done screaming out all of his pain-

But then America felt someone pick him up off the cold, hard pavement and pull him into a hug. Through a mixture of being unable to scream anymore and surprise at being hugged, America became eerily silent. He felt like he was being surrounded by a warm teddy bear. America vaguely heard someone speaking to him in a comforting voice. They were saying it was okay and other various phrases in Russian. America knew that voice, it was Russia's. Why had Russia followed him? Why was Russia there,

comforting him? America had hurt him...

But Russia was still there, hugging America when he needed someone to.

A sob escaped America's lips. He didn't know how much he needed a hug until he finally got one. America leaned into Russia, putting his head on Russia's shoulder. Why was Russia there? Why was he still there with America, after all he had done? After the cold war, after everything... why was he still there? Why?

America felt Russia's hand rub his back comfortingly and a fresh round of tears slipped down America's cheeks. Why did Russia care so much for an idiot like him? Did he really mean that much to Russia? America felt so confused and guilty, trapped in that warm embrace. He wasn't good enough for a friend like Russia, but Russia's embrace felt so warm. America was kind of glad. Glad that Russia was still with him, happy to be in Russia's embrace.

Slowly but surely, America felt the world slowly come back to him. Everything looked blurry, but that was probably just the tears that kept on stubbornly rolling down America's cheeks. America didn't feel like stopping them anymore. He was too tired and worn out. He wanted to sleep, but was also afraid of what sleep might entail. America closed his eyes. If he couldn't sleep, he'd at least pretend to sleep.

Now that America's eyes were closed, he was able to fully notice the overwhelming warmth of Russia's hug. America felt his panic slip away in mere moments, and his mind went silent. In Russia's arms, America felt a sense of peace and contentedness he hadn't felt in such a long time. America was glad that Russia cared for him. Maybe... maybe America could become someone worthy of being Russia's friend.

After a little bit longer, America's tears dried up. Russia pulled away from the hug, and America flinched at the loss of warmth. Russia gently wiped away the remnants of America's tears, a guilty look in his eyes, "Are you okay? I'm sorry, I pushed you too much."

Sorry? No, that isn't right. He shouldn't be saying sorry, it was all

America's fault. America was the one who overreacted, slapped Russia's hand, ran off, and had a panic attack. None of this was Russia's fault. None of it. But America didn't dare say that out loud. He didn't want to let Russia down after he had spent who knows how long comforting him when he should be spending his time eating lunch instead of caring for someone as useless as America. Not only that, but America couldn't bring himself to make Russia sad or hurt him in any way, even if he was just saying the truth. He couldn't do it, he just couldn't. Instead, he asked a question he'd been asking himself for way too long, "Why do you care about me?" America's voice was hoarse from all the screaming and sobbing; but if Russia noticed, he didn't seem to care.

Russia smiled sweetly, "Why wouldn't I? You're the most amazing person I know. You mean a lot to me."

"...Why did you chase after me even though I... even though I *hurt* you?" America asked, looking down at his feet. America had a stricken look on his face

"Because making sure you don't die on me is more important than any argument we may have. And, uh, I did kinda sit there in shock for a few moments before I chased after you." Russia sighed, "You're gonna make me age faster, you make me so worried."

America smiled faintly. He looked at Russia, noticing how genuine Russia was as he said that. For some odd reason, Russia truly believed that America was worth it. But why? America didn't know the true answer and no matter what Russia said, it never made sense to him. It didn't make sense at all.

...Maybe it doesn't need to make sense.

America smiled, real joy bubbling in his heart, "God, you're the worst."

America doesn't know much. Everything he has ever known had, in the past month, collapsed rather dramatically onto him; but... he did know one thing. Russia had stuck by his side. The idiot flung himself onto a sinking ship and smiled while doing so. America didn't know why... America doesn't know a lot of things these days

anyway. America knows he isn't worth it, but for some odd reason, he wants to become good enough. He didn't want to disappoint his friend. He wanted to make Russia happy. He wanted to become worth it.

Russia stood up, smiling. He reached his hand out for America to take, "So, uh, are we gonna have lunch? We can talk about your cracks later, your mental stability and making sure you don't starve comes first."

America raised an eyebrow and took Russia's hand, letting the taller pull him up into a standing position, "Ok, sure, whatever you say."

America doesn't know much;

But for some goddamn reason, he really wants Russia to hug him again.

Chapter 26: Is this the thing called love? \\ The Ballroom

[image]

Confederacy was looking over his plans when he heard a muffled grunt. Slightly worried but mostly annoyed, he turned around to see PR on the floor, his legs shaking unnaturally.

"Are you okay?" Confederacy asked his slightly peeved brother.

"I hate you," PR responded, his eyes flicking over to meet Confederacy's. His legs were shaking and he couldn't walk, but he was a little too used to it at this point.

"May I ask why?" Confederacy clicked his tongue and turned back to their plans.

"It's because you hear me fall, and you do nothing. God, you really need a few lessons in comradery."

"Woah, using big words now, are you? Isn't that a bit hard for your tiny brain to handle?" Confederacy said with a shit-eating grin.

PR glared at Confederacy, "I will *murder* you," After receiving no response from Confederacy, PR sighed, "To answer your previous question, no, I am not okay."

Confederacy immediately turned around to face PR at that, his eyes glinting with slight anger. No word was spoken, but PR knew what question was probably floating in his brother's head.

"No, it won't affect our plans. It's just a few earthquakes, that's all. I'll be fine, I've been through worse," PR hissed. Getting the feeling that he had to prove what he said, PR stood up, his legs shaking a little bit less. He lost his balance but quickly recovered it before he could fall down again. He refused to be seen as weak right now.

Confederacy's eyes narrowed, "Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'll be *fine*. I'd just prefer it if our plans- or should I say *your* plans- went a little quicker."

"Your... *condition* better not mess everything up," Confederacy threatened, ignoring PR's little comment.

PR glanced at his brother in arms and frowned, "I'll. Be. Fine." And with that, PR walked away.

--x--

Beep! Beep!

America slammed the off button on his alarm. He had pulled another all-nighter. He felt like literal shit. He had let Russia down. Again. It more so letting himself down, but it felt like America was letting Russia down at the same time. America had tried, he really did, but the temptation to not eat and run away from his nightmares was greater than the need for hunger and sleep. America had learned how to function while starving. *He* was fine, but Russia wouldn't be.

He'll be worried and disappointed, and that's not what America wants. America doesn't want to be a burden, but it sure feels like he is. He felt like a wrong answer someone had tried to erase, but their rubber eraser had hardened and made a disgusting pink streak over the already wrong answer. Yeah, that.

America had promised he'd try, but god was that hard.

He can't do anything right.

America felt as though there was a long, thin tightrope in front of him. On the other side of that tightrope, America was good enough. On the other side of that tightrope, America wasn't a burden to those around him, but America didn't want to go on that thin, long tightrope. It looked too dangerous. It looked too hard. If America tried to cross, he'd fall. He just knew it. America didn't want to try crossing it and falling down, he just wanted to sleep.

But sleep meant nightmares.

He deserves those nightmares. He owes it to everyone who's died because of him. Everyone he's *killed.* America shivered.

Realizing he was gonna be late if he didn't stop thinking, America quickly got ready, slipping on a fresh suit, the gloves gifted to him from Britain, and his signature glasses. Just as America was about to leave (skipping breakfast as usual), he heard someone knock on his door. America cast a confused glance towards the door and opened it to see Russia.

Confusion instantly hit America. Why was Russia here? A variety of answers immediately slammed America. Most of them negative. Scrap that, all of them were negative. America felt any confidence he might have had shrivel up and die deep inside of him.

'You let him down, you let him down, you let him down.' A voice screamed in America's head.

"Доброе утро, Америка. **(Good morning, America)**"

America awkwardly looked to the side and responded, "Uhhh, hi?"

"Have you eaten breakfast yet?" Russia asked, getting straight to the point. America could've sworn Russia was making holes in America's head by how hard Russia was staring. America would be lying if he said that he wasn't nervous and utterly terrified.

'You let him down.' Ah, the voice was back already.

"Yeah, I've had breakfast already! Why are you asking such weird questions?" America lied.

'You let him down.'

But the lie was in vain. Unfortunately for America, Russia had figured America out at this point. He knew America was lying. Russia frowned, "You haven't had breakfast yet, have you?"

'YOU LET HIM DOWN!'

America instantly cursed internally. He's been caught, he's been caught. Time to retreat- America needed to find a corner *stat-*

But before America could react in any way whatsoever, Russia was already dragging the poor country down to the lobby of the hotel. America could only watch as Russia dragged him into a car and told the driver to drive to the UN Headquarters.

America awkwardly clicked his tongue, "Are you going to let go of my arm at some point or..."

"Nope. I will continue to drag you until you eat."

America pursed his lips and said quietly under his breath, "Ok, great talk."

America was screaming internally.

After a few more awkward moments, they arrived at the Headquarters. Russia then proceeded to drag America inside and America tried staying as limp as possible, effectively becoming dead weight.

Once America was dragged inside, however, he became a little more animated as something caught his eye. The buffet! America looked at the buffet, which was all set up, and felt a swell of pride flow through him. Right, the buffet he had set up! And, countries were actually using it! America saw Germany, Japan, and China among the countries around the buffet bar. America had done something useful!

"We are getting you some food," Russia stated as he ushered America over to the buffet bar.

"No, no, no, I'm good. I already ate, I said this already," America insisted, trying to squeeze himself out of this one.

"Please, can you eat?" Russia hesitated before adding, "For me?"

America noticed a concerned tone laced into Russia's voice and immediately felt guilt slam him in the gut.

'... *you let him down.'*

America couldn't say no. Russia was worried about him, and he didn't want to make Russia feel any worse because of him. He didn't want to be the reason why Russia was sad. America wanted to disappear. At least then he would be able to bother anyone anymore. America sighed and gave Russia a very small nod, looking away from the Russian.

America got his food and sat down at a table with Russia. America picked at his food, avoiding the actual eating part of getting food. But, one look at Russia's concerned face gave America enough motivation to eat one pancake.

Russia sighed, "I guess that's better than nothing."

"Why do you insist on caring about me?" America asked. America had let Russia down, he had chosen not to eat again this morning. Why wasn't Russia mad? Why did he care so *gosh darn much!*

Russia gave America a small smile, "Is this going to be a question you keep on asking? You're my friend. You're someone I care about a lot. The question you should be asking is why wouldn't I care."

America smiled to himself. ... Maybe he *should* ask that question instead. No promises this time, though. That hasn't worked out well so far. America looked up at Russia and let Russia see his smile. America didn't know why he continually had these seeds of doubt planted in his head, but every single time Russia somehow pulls each of them out like the weeds they are.

Maybe Russia's just a really good gardener.

America laughed a little bit, feeling his face warm up. Russia cares. Maybe he cares a little too much, but that's okay. He cares. And, America couldn't deny the joy that bubbled in his chest because of the Russian in front of him.

"Thank you," America said, unable to look Russia in the eyes for some reason. America's face felt warm.

America glanced up at his friend just in time to see Russia warmly

smile and say, "No problem, Meri."

America couldn't help but smile back, happiness exploding in his chest like fireworks on the fourth of July.

--x--

"That concludes this meeting," UN stated, closing the files in front of him and walking off to sit a nearby chair.

The minute UN said this, America rushed up to Russia. Russia gave him a confused look. "Russia, as a way of thanking you, I'm going to show you someplace cool!"

"Oh," Russia started, a little bit surprised, "You don't have to, America."

"You can't stop me. If I don't do *something*, it's going to torture me till the end of my life!" America frowned. He might've been exaggerating, but at the same time, he might've been telling the truth. I guess it all depends...

I guess it all depends on America's cracks.

Speaking of the cracks, they had actually stopped growing. America hadn't noticed any new cracks yesterday and today. But then again, how much is there even left to crack? Well, his face was still devoid of cracks currently. America self-consciously adjusted his glasses.

"Ok, ok, let's go to this place you're talking about. You better not disappoint, though," Russia joked. America nodded and headed towards the front of the building. Once one of the assigned drivers pulled up to the curb, the two got inside the car and America instructed the driver to take them to the hotel. Russia looked at America questioningly, but America's only response was a smile.

The second the car reached its final destination, America ran inside the hotel. Russia hurried to keep up, following America hallway after hallway, turn after turn. Russia made sure he didn't lose track of the surprisingly fast country as they raced down the halls like little children playing a game of tag. The thought made Russia smile. America suddenly stopped in front of a large, white door.

There was a sign above the door labeled "Cornelia Room." Russia came to a halt next to America.

America fished a key out of his pocket, unlocked the white door, and opened it, revealing a small ballroom with a grand piano in the right corner, next to the grand windows on the far side. The floor was made out of smooth, light-brown wood, and the surprising elegance of the room caught Russia by surprise. It felt like something out of a princess movie- the ballroom where the maiden is swept off her feet by a charming prince. It also felt really, really British. Russia thought America hated stuff like this. Apparently not.

"Why is this even in the hotel?" Russia asked, walking up to one of the grand pillars near the front of the room and touching it in amazement.

America chuckled at Russia's reaction, "This is more of a British-style hotel and it-" America paused for a moment, but cleared his throat and continued with what he was saying, "- It reminded me of my Dad and me when I was younger. Back in the day, Dad used to have a ballroom just like this. He would hold a ton of balls to see my step-mom, France, more often. Britain loved seeing her unreasonably mad back then." America chuckled, "They were more like an arguing, old married couple than rivals during that time. Though they would probably insist otherwise, it's very true." America smiled at the good memories, "I vaguely remember this one ball where France, her older brother- who was later called Napoleonic France- and her dad all came together. The entire time, France and Dad argued while France's dad kept on giving them suspicious looks that were absolutely hilarious. Just a month after that, the Seven Years War broke out. To this day, I like to believe that the war was at least partially caused by Monarchical France's protectiveness.

"Anyway," America continued, "I booked this place because it reminded me of my childhood. So, uh, yeah."

"This place is beautiful. You made a very good choice." Russia commented warmly, still facing away from America to look at the room and its little niches.

"Thanks," America felt warmth creeping onto his face, but it quickly faded away.

America sat down on the floor and Russia eventually joined them. They started talking about all sorts of things, barely noticing the sun starting to dip down into the horizon.

With the orange hues of the Monday sunset peeking into the room, America laid down on his back to look at the ceiling, all the conversation present a moment ago drying up. Russia stiffly got up and cracked a few of his bones.

"Discostan," America commented. Russia didn't grace him with a reply. Instead, Russia walked over to a small soundbox near the front of the room. America, intrigued by what Russia was doing, sat up to look at him. Even so, he didn't really get a good view of what Russia was doing.

Music started seeping into the ballroom. What Russia did suddenly registered in America's brain. Russia had used the soundbox to play classic English Waltz. America laughed, "Hey, Russ! If you're going to play English Waltz, play English Jazz Waltz!"

"I don't think they have that," Russia responded, swiftly looking through what they had.

"Aw, Jazz Waltz is obviously the superior waltz."

"You only say that because Jazz was invented by your people," Russia scoffed.

America laughed, "True, True. You caught me there."

Russia smiled to himself, turning around to face America, "Since we are in a ballroom that is playing some pretty nice waltz, I think we should do it some justice. What good is a ballroom if no one is dancing in it?" Russia cleared his throat and held his hand out, a slight red creeping onto his face, "Would you care to join me in a dance?"

America's gaze flickered between Russia's face and his hand in pure shock. America burst out laughing. Russia *had* to be joking! There

was no way- Russia asking him to a dance? That would never happen in a billion years! But as America continued to look Russia in the eyes, America's bubbling laughter quickly went quiet. Wait a second... was Russia being serious? Oh, god. Russias was being serious.

In a split second, America felt warmth creep back onto his face, "A-are you sure?" America asked, trying to force his heart to stop racing. Why was he acting like this? This was just a dance. He had danced with a ton of women before. Why was this time in particular so nerve-wracking?

Russia nodded, his eyes both gentle and serious, "I've never been so sure of anything as I am of this."

America laughed at how seriously Russia was taking this, already feeling his nerves calm down. This was Russia he was talking about. His friend. Russia wouldn't judge, he just wants to do this for fun. America smiled and said in his best impression of Britain, "Why yes, it would be an honor to dance with you." And without a moment's hesitation, America put his hand in Russia's.

Relief immediately washed over Russia's features as Russia felt America's hand in his. Their hands were a perfect fit, fitting together like puzzle pieces, "You're probably going to regret this."

"Why would I?"

"I don't know how to dance," Russia chuckled, pulling America closer into what he thought was a waltz position.

America started laughing, "I regret many things, and this is not one of them."

With jerky, uncoordinated movements, they started dancing. Well, dancing would be an overstatement. It was more like two giggling monkeys who were incapable of controlling their limbs and were just flailing about. Every time they messed up or did something stupid, they would just laugh it off and attempt to dance again.

As the sun started to dip lower into the horizon, America started to

take the lead in their uncoordinated dance, memories of his youth springing up and taking control. He (quite awkwardly) led the taller country in their waltz. With America- who was actually experienced in waltzing- leading, they messed up a lot less. The music flowed around them as they danced, like a river carrying a paper boat downstream. America closed his eyes and let the music and the calming feeling of dancing with someone surround him. No voices, no headaches, no nothing. Just him, the music, and Russia.

The world around him faded into background noise as he and Russia traversed across the floor. As Russia became more and more acquainted with the dance, he started leading them. America let Russia lead him across the ballroom, hearing the light tapping of their shoes against the wood.

America felt peaceful, content, and happy. He could stay dancing here forever and ever.

"Um... the ballroom is closed after 9 PM Monday through Friday."

America's eyes shot open and he quickly scrambled away from Russia, jerking his head towards the noise. It was a young man looking like he was fresh out of college. Considering his outfit and what he said, he probably worked here at the hotel. America felt his face pale. What did he see? Wait... why is he even concerned about what that kid saw? It wasn't anything special.

But even America could recognize that as a lie. What just happened was special, it was so much more than just dancing. That dance was a special moment between Russia and him, it was-

"Uhh... are you going to sit there or what?" The worker continued, a very obvious New Yorker accent poking into his voice.

Russia was the first one to respond, "Uhh, yeah. We can head out if you want."

"Yeah, uh, it would be preferred if you left pretty soon. And by that, I mean right now."

Russia nodded, turning to give America an apologetic look, "Let's

go."

America followed Russia out of the room, just realizing how dark it was. How long had they danced? Russia's voice caught America's attention.

"We were awful. Well, awful until you took the lead. Where did you learn to waltz like that anyway?"

"My dad. He taught me when I was young. He taught all of his children how to dance. He insisted on all of us being 'proper.' ... I guess I never lived up to that expectation, huh?"

Russia immediately frowned at that and decided to move on to another subject, "Is there anything else Britain made you learn to do?"

America looked up at the ceiling, thinking about Russia's question, "Yeah, actually. My dad made me learn how to play the piano."

Russia glanced at America, surprised, "Really? I didn't take you as a piano player."

America chuckled, "I never really was. I just learned 'cause my Dad made me."

"Could you play a song for me sometime?"

America felt his face become warm again and looked to the side. He bit the inside of his cheek in nervousness, his mind racing. He suddenly stopped walking, causing Russia to look at him in confusion. America exhaled deeply before turning towards Russia and taking the taller's hand in his. America looked straight into Russia's eyes and declared with a determined look on his face, "I'll play for you sometime, I promise."

"I'm sure you'll be the best piano player there ever was," Russia smiled.

"No, I won't," America laughed under his breath, his cheeks red from the praise. America turned away and started walking again, dragging Russia along with. But, neither let go of the other's hand.

"To me, you will." America glanced over at Russia, only to see Russia still smiling warmly.

"You flatter me," America chuckled, looking forward again. Russia was too nice to him, "but, thank you. Again. For the millionth time."

"For what?"

"Everything, like usual," America's face broke into a heart-warming smile as he looked back at Russia, "You make me happy, that's all. Real happy, I mean."

A blush crept back on to Russia's face and America laughed. After a few more moments, they had reached America's apartment. America reluctantly let go of Russia's hand. For some reason, America didn't want to let go of Russia's hand. He wanted to continue talking and maybe dance again. America's face went red. America shook his head fervently, slapping his cheeks. Why was he thinking these things?! America sighed and glanced back at Russia, who was very concerned because of the fact America had literally just slapped himself. America gave him a sheepish smile and was about to wave Russia goodbye when he suddenly changed his mind and gave Russia a quick hug instead.

"Night, Russ!" America shouted, proceeding to quickly detach himself from Russia and duck into his hotel room, a red blush all over his face. America closed the door and breathed out a laugh, sliding down his door. America had never felt so nervous, clammy, happy, and alive.

With the determination to be enough for Russia urging him onwards, America went over to his bed and laid on it, trying to fall asleep. And, when America did fall into the land of slumber, a miracle happened.

For the first time in a month, America didn't have a single nightmare that night.

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3
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Ch 27: The things you figure out under the moon \\ The Chat with a Sassy Cat

Russia opened his eyes. He was in a clearing. Russia saw the prairie grass around him wave in the wind, but felt no wind himself.

Russia got up to his feet quickly to get a good look at his surroundings. To Russia's right, the clearing cut off abruptly into a sheer drop. Russia's eyes widened. America was sitting there, close to the edge. He wasn't sitting on the edge, but he was close enough for Russia to be terrified for him. Heck, America was so close to the edge that if he took too many steps backwards, he would fall. America had a black suit on, almost like he was heading towards a meeting.

However, taking a closer look, that wasn't the full picture. Despite the noisy rustling of the long grass, Russia was able to faintly hear America cry and see the racking of his body with each sob.

"America...?"

At the sound of Russia's voice, America turned his head and some of his upper body sharply to face the taller country. Russia felt his heart clench at the sight. America looked so... sad and hopeless. Tears were rolling down his cheeks and his signature glasses were gone, revealing pitch-black eyes as well as a scar over one of them. Russia's breath caught in his throat. Black eyes.... Russia knew what black eyes meant. Every country did. Russia felt tears start to threaten him at the thought.

That horrid thought... But then again, it's not like Russia doesn't know what's going to happen, it's just that blacks eyes meant... meant... Oh god, was Russia too late? No, no... they still have time. He still has time. He won't... he won't let anyone else collapse in front of him again.

In America's hands were what looked to be two broken stars. Not only that, but now that Russia had a good view of America's face, he could

tell there was something off. The structure of his stars was different...

Almost like a few stars were missing.

Russia watched as America shakily stood up and turned to face Russia fully, letting go of the broken stars. Russia saw them hit the floor and shatter into a million tiny pieces. America whispered something, but Russia couldn't hear it. Russia frowned, slowly moving closer to America.

"THEY'RE GONE!" Dream America repeated, much louder this time. Russia, startled by the sudden yelling, grimaced.

America flinched at the unexpected volume of his own voice and stumbled backwards a little bit, getting closer to the edge of the cliff. America started shaking his head hysterically, a fresh round of tears adorning his cheeks, "They're gone and it's all my fault," America spoke softly, slowly walking backwards, "it's all my fault, it's all my-"

America's breath caught in his throat and Russia's heart lurched in pure fear.

America's left foot was off the edge.

Russia immediately sprinted towards America as the striped country started falling. Russia stretched out his hand to grab hold of America. Russia managed to grasp a piece of fabric on America's sleeve and felt triumph flow through him

...But America was too heavy, and the piece of fabric slipped right through Russia's grip.

Time seemed to slow down as America plummeted towards the earth, his expression one of shock and his suit jacket whipping around him. America looked down and you could tell how he wished he didn't, the way his face contorted in fear and the way his limbs suddenly scrabbled to grab hold of anything- ANYTHING- only to grab hold of nothing. Russia could do nothing as he saw the one person he had ever loved plummet closer and closer to the ground. He could do nothing, and it broke him inside.

"AMERICA!" Russia screamed. But screaming would do no good.

America was too far away. He was too close to the ground, he was getting closer by the second-

The loud sound of skin hitting solid rock echoed harshly up the side of the cliff. Russia screamed louder than he ever has before, his heart shattering into tiny pieces at the sight of America's limp and bloody body thousands of miles below him. Tears flowed down Russia's cheeks and sobs racked his body.

Why? Why wasn't it him who fell? America was amazing and meant everything to Russia and yet... Russia could do nothing. Russia did nothing.

Russia curled into a tiny ball, sobbing even more as the cliffside around Russia flashed away.

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Russia woke up in a cold sweat. His hands were clammy and fear coursed through his veins. Russia felt tears rolling down his cheeks. Oh god, oh god, that was a dream... more like a nightmare. Russia felt like throwing up, the sight at the end of that dream all too present in his mind.

Speaking of which, Russia's mind flew to America. Russia needed to check on him. Russia didn't care that what he just saw was a nightmare, he needed to see America. He needed to make sure he was ok. He needed to see America's small, cute smile and remind himself that as long as Russia's still alive that dumb dork *won't* die on him. Russia quickly got dressed and practically ran out the door, not even bothering to tell Ukraine where he was going.

Russia practically sprinted towards America's room and knocked on the door, waiting for an answer. Russia waited for what seemed to be years, only for no answer. Russia knocked again, this time more rapid and anxious, easily displaying Russia's emotions at the moment.

Once again receiving no answer, Russia felt fear choke him. Where was America? Surely the dream wasn't.... No, no, no, that was just a stupid dream. Dreams aren't real. But even as Russia told himself

that, he couldn't stop his own fears and anxieties from swallowing him whole. Where was America?!

Russia glanced at the door. He could, theoretically, kick it down or something along those lines. He knew how to with normal doors, but would hotel doors work the same way? Only one way to find out, I guess. There was most definitely a more logical and less aggressive solution to this, but whatever. Russia got into position, ready to kick down the door in three, two, one-

"Hey, Russia!"

Russia, in the middle of kicking a door, paused and consequently stumbled, almost falling down. But, in a rather magnificent show of waving limbs and whatnot, Russia managed to maintain his balance at the cost of looking like a little kid on a balance beam. Russia turned to his head to see the one and only Maple Weed, who was barely managing to keep his laughter in at the sight of the oh-so-serious Russia stumbling and flailing his limbs about like a Magikarp.

Russia instantly became embarrassed, resorting to a poker face, "Hello, Canada." Russia mentally praised himself for remembering Canada's name. No offense to the country, but Canada was so nice and non-offensive that he was kind of easy to forget. After a moment's hesitation, Russia added, "Do you know where America is?" This is Canada. He should know where America is, as the dork's brother and all. Actually, nevermind. Russia had no idea where most of his family was right now, so that wasn't entirely true.

Canada tilted his head a little, "He didn't tell you?"

"No, was I supposed to know?"

"I thought you were, but America must've forgotten," Canada shook his head slightly. "America went over to the Headquarters early. I think he was planning on having a quick conversation with NATO, but I'm not really sure."

Oh, that's why. Russia immediately felt embarrassed. America was fine, he'd just overreacted due to that weird dream. Russia heaved a

sigh of relief, at least America's okay. That's all that matters. Russia gave Canada a small nod, "If that's the case, I'll head over to the Headquarters now. Thank you, Canada."

Russia quickly rushed himself out of that situation and into a car, watching the scenery of the busy city enfold before him. Once Russia reached the Headquarters, he jumped out of the car and speed-walked into the lobby. Russia's eyes immediately scanned the room for America, eventually locating said country in the corner with Japan and South Korea. Japan was talking intensely about something, America was nodding along, and South Korea was simply giving Japan some concerned looks.

Russia started walking up to the three. America noticed the tall country first, his eyes and expression lighting up almost instantly. Russia couldn't help but find that adorable. America quickly waved Russia over to join the conversation he was having with the two Asian countries. Japan looked behind her at who America was gesturing at, only to see Russia. Her eyes immediately widened and she looked at America, whispering something. South Korea gave one look at Russia and practically did the same as Japan, except he listened to what Japan was saying instead of talking himself.

Russia sighed at their reactions but walked up to them away. Just as he arrived, America shoved away Japan, who had a weird look on her face that Russia didn't like. It was an unpleasant mixture of "what is going on here" and "I will find out all your secrets and you can't stop me." South Korea laughed and backed away from America, making some room for Russia to join their little circle.

Russia looked at them weirdly, "Should I know what you were just talking about?"

"I guess that depends on America," Japan responded passively, still giving America that look.

America looked extremely weirded out and said, "I have *no* idea what she's talking about."

South Korea laughed again, "Honestly, who does? I've been her neighbor for years and even I barely know half of the time."

Japan rolled her eyes, grabbing South's ear, yanking him downward, and whispering something in his ear. His face slowly went from concern and surprise to a vague sort of understanding. Japan said louder, "Now do you understand?"

South nodded, deviousness forming on his face. He was about to say something in response when he noticed the time and the countries filing into the meeting room, "I think we should head inside now."

America smiled, "Sounds like a good idea." South and Japan started walking towards the meeting room, talking furiously about something, while Russia and America stayed where they were. At that moment, America turned to Russia, flashing a brilliant smile that made Russia's heart flutter, "Let's go inside, shall we?"

Russia smiled and nodded, following America inside the room and taking his seat.

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When the meeting was over, America rushed over to South and Japan, "So, is the night out still on?"

Earlier this morning, America had gotten out of his small meeting with NATO earlier than expected, so the three had been talking for a while. Sometime during their conversation, South asked if everyone wanted to hang out after the meeting and America agreed immediately for multiple reasons. But, the main reason was guilt. America felt so bad for hanging out with Russia and not hanging out with his other friends. First of all, he was basically wasting Russia's time; plus, America felt so incredibly bad for not talking with Jap or South once in the past month. He had to make up for that. He had to.

Japan smiled crazily, "You betcha that it's still on! I have some questions I wanna ask you, America-san!"

That immediately caught America's attention. Japan usually didn't use Japanese honorifics outside of Japan. It may sound weird, but it's probably because of her own personal preference or something. Thus, Japan was being serious. What questions was she even

planning on asking?!

Before America could think too deeply on the matter, he felt a hand on his shoulder and turned to see Russia. Russia was about to say something when Japan snatched America away, trapping him in a friendly arm, "Nuh-uh-uh, this is a girl's night out. No boys allowed."

America looked at Japan like she was an alien from another planet, "South and I are literally *both boys*-"

"Shoooooosh, we all know you two are girls at heart. The most-definitely dominant, assertive, scary-as-fuck Russia? Now he *reeks* with masculinity. Plus, this is for friends *only*. Sorry but not sorry, Russia, you've been kicked from the server." With that being said, Japan put her arms on her friends' shoulders, smirking at Russia with the occasional glance towards her friends.

Russia gave a half-threatening, half-what-the-heck-are-you-talking-about face. South spoke first, however, "Ok, prove it. How are we girls at heart?"

Japan smirked even wider, taking up the challenge, "South, you act like a girly wimp whenever you see a spider to the point where I- *I*-" Japan put her hand on her chest and became louder on the second 'I' to exaggerate its meaning, "have to kill it for you! Sounds pretty girlish to me. Plus, you love all my sappy romance stories. As for America," Japan turned on her heel to face said country, her tail flicking about, "I've seen the wooden dolls in your basement, and they look like someone plays with them."

"Wooden dolls? What are you talking about-" America paused, suddenly realizing what she was talking about. As soon as he realized it, America instantly became offended, "Did you just take a jab at my *childhood,* Japan?! Also, those are *not* dolls, they're my childhood toys-"

"Dolls are a type of toy," Japan countered, sending America into a fury of rage.

"You-!" America was interrupted, being held back by South. Japan

laughed as America struggled in South's grip, yelling about how Japan had no right to stoop that low. Japan simply jeered back that he couldn't do anything as long as he was being held back. But then again, America wasn't using his full strength to free himself from his friend's grip- he wasn't going to send South Korea flying... hopefully.

Japan cast a gleeful glance towards Russia, an idea popping into her mind, "America, don't you remember this tall and handsome is still right here?" America's reaction was instant. At first, he curled back a little at Japan's comment, with red creeping onto his face, before he started struggling again and asking Russia to help him with Japan's "unjust judgments of his childhood."

Russia, however, was unfazed by Japan's comment on him being "tall and handsome." Although, if America had been the one to say that, you bet you would've gotten a much different reaction. Russia, wanting to help out America, considered his options. Getting an idea, Russia spoke, "So, Japan, how about we make a deal?"

Japan perked up a little at the sound of a deal, her ears twitching in excitement and her eyes flickering playfully between Russia and America before settling on the former, "What kind of deal?"

"I agree to let you have your..." Russia snorted, "girls night out, but in return, you have to stop torturing and teasing America. Deal?" Russia stuck out his hand for Japan to shake it.

Japan's lips turned upwards into a grin, "Deal." Japan shook the Russian's hand. With that, Russia waved goodbye and walked off, giving America a slightly-apologetic look for leaving him alone to fend for himself against Japan. Hesitantly, South let go of the fuming America.

America immediately went up to Japan and yanked on her tail harshly. She yelped, and looked at America, confused and hurt. "You deserved that," America stated.

Japan, slightly butthurt and delicately holding the yanked tail, frowned dejectedly at America before whining, "You're so mean."

South Korea patted her back in sympathy and she brightened up just the tiniest bit, "Now, time for our girls night out!"

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Japan jumped excitedly while they waited for their boba tea. Because this is Japan we're talking about, she insisted they go here first. They were next in line for the cashier, the two people in front of the group being a middle-aged man and a young boy. Once the two were done, Japan, South, and America walked up to order. They all ordered and went over to a table by the window to sit down and wait for their drinks.

Once they got their boba tea, Japan immediately started rambling about all sorts of gossip, some of which were that Canada and Ukraine were a thing, Norway destroyed Sweden's computer while Sweden was playing Minecraft and Sweden got way too salty about it, and other various things. Most of the gossip Japan had to spill was really funny, so America was having a great time.

Eventually, Japan got tired of the gossip and leaned across the table to get closer to America, as they were straight across from each other. Japan smirked and asked, "So, America let's continue the conversation we were having before the meeting," She sipped on her boba tea for dramatic suspense before continuing, "Are you single?"

America raised an eyebrow, confused about how this related to their earlier conversation, "Yes, why are you asking?"

"No reason, no reason at all," Japan sassily sipped on her tea and leaned back, the topic seemingly dropped. But no, it wasn't really dropped. No, Japan's just gonna slam the topic back on the table in the best way possible. Just give her a few seconds.

...

"So, America, do you have a crush on Russia or something?"

America spat out the tea that was in his mouth, faintly hearing South say "ew." America coughed, immediately grabbing a few

napkins from the napkin container in the middle of the table and cleaning the mess. America cleared his throat, and said quickly, "No, no, no, I don't like him. He's just a friend, that's all."

Japan raised her eyebrow in obvious disbelief, "Are you sure about that?"

"Yes. Of course I'm sure, why wouldn't I be?" America insisted, trying to rationalize the question in his own brain. He didn't like Russia, no way. They were just friends.

"Ok, if you really don't like him that way, could I steal him?" Japan said. America almost spat out his drink again, but stopped himself and choked on his tea instead. South seemed to do a similar thing.

"W-what?" America sputtered out after swallowing his drink correctly.

"Since you don't like him, you won't mind if I dated him, would you? I think he's pretty hot." Japan continued nonchalantly, fiddling with her long- and sharp- nails. South's eyes raced between America and Japan, almost as if he couldn't believe the conversation he was hearing right now.

"I-I-" America stuttered. Russia... with Japan? Nononono, that felt so wrong. America felt a sudden pang of just *wrongness* overwhelm him before he got a hold of himself and snapped out of it. Japan with Russia? That was fine. Of course it was fine, he didn't exactly have the right to stop them from getting together if they truly wanted to.

But America wasn't sure he really believed that anymore. It may sound overwhelmingly selfish, but America didn't want Japan and Russia to be together. Just the concept of it happening felt so- so- *wrong*. But... why was it wrong to him? Why did it even matter to his stupid brain whether they got together or not?

America gulped and continued quietly, "I guess I mind..."

"What does *that* mean?" Japan queried. After not receiving any further response, Japan thought she'd crack this shell at a different

angle. She had seen that look America had given Russia this morning. It felt so familiar, like something she'd seen before. And then, she noticed it. It was an emotion Japan herself had been feeling recently...

Japan just had to figure America's emotions out for him, and if she was right, she was going to be the most supportive friend ever. If that means she has to be a diva now, who cares? It was fun being a sassy diva. Japan continued, "Ok, I'm gonna ask this question again: Do you love Russia? Maybe love's a strong word- Do you have a crush on Russia?"

Not receiving an answer once again, Japan leaned back in her chair, a faint smile on her face, "I'm not dumb or anything. I saw how your face lit up the moment you saw him in the room. You looked so... happy. Much happier than what I could ever make you as your friend. As silly as it sounds, you looked like a little child again. It was... nice, really nice. It didn't make any sense when I first saw it, but then it clicked in my brain. You guys have made up, right? I mean, I can't believe I didn't notice that, he *did* stand up for you that one time a month ago.

"So, I'm..." Japan waved her hand around, looking for the right word to say, "I guess what I'm trying to say is that I get this feeling that, even if you aren't aware of it, there's something between you two that's so- so adorable and amazing," Japan's soft smile grew as she kept on rambling, "So, I'm not sure if I'm right or not, but can you think about it? And, if I turn out to be right, promise me you'll never let go of this amazing connection you guys have. That connection- it really is special." Japan's smile became sadder, "God, I wish I had that kind of connection, too."

South gave off a sad expression as well, "Yeah, I wish."

America's gaze flickered between the two of them as Japan's words sunk in. It felt like America got hit with a bowling ball and the adrenaline from it happening was still numbing the pain. Him and Russia? No way... Russia was just a friend. But... was he? America clutched the fabric of his shirt sleeves in his hands, moving his thumbs along the ridges of the fabric. Who was Russia to him, anyway? Why did he make America so happy? Why did America

dance with him and promise him something that America isn't even sure he's in the mental state to fulfill? Why does America want to *live* every day, just to see Russia stubbornly knocking on his door in the morning? And... why did he feel so warm and gooey inside?

Was... this what it felt like to love?

Does he... love Russia?

America was snapped out his thoughts by the horrendous screeching of a metal chair being moved along a tiled floor, looking up to see Japan standing with an empty, plastic cup in her hand.

"What are you waiting for, America? We're going to the movies!" Japan cheered, as if their conversation had never happened. America gave a tired sigh as he got up, smiling and choosing to stop thinking about the funny mental pickle he was stuck in. Sure, he could humor his friends with a movie, it would distract him after all.

And that's all America needed, a distraction...

Then Russia would just go back to just being his friend.

His handsome, amazing friend.

--x--

As the credits rolled down the screen, Japan was busy shoving the rest of her popcorn down her mouth. She kind of looked like a squirrel stuffing acorns in its tiny mouth, but America didn't say that out loud. If he did, then Japan would literally murder him.

Exiting the movie theater, the three parted ways as Japan and South headed to the hotel while America headed towards an all-too-familiar park. America didn't go out to eat dinner or anything, it was only eight at night. America had all the time in the world. I mean, it's not like he needed dinner anyway. His body could go without a few meals. Then again, that was probably America's fault for accidentally training his body to be able to go without the occasional meal.

As America sat down on the soft grass, the last streams of light were fading from the sky and the city's bright lights were only just awakening to light up the night. America laid down, looking up at the lighter-than-what-it-should-be night sky. America could see no stars, but he could vividly remember what they used to look like in New York City, scattered across the night sky. The moon was just rising, it's silver crescent ready to light up the sky where the stars could not.

America looked up at the night sky contentedly, his thoughts flying back to what Japan had asked him earlier.

Did he love Russia?

He didn't think so. But, he might. America wasn't so sure anymore.

But as the night grew later and as America got more and more comfortable among the grass, he suddenly noticed how he wanted to show Russia this place and point out where all the stars might've been if it was the 1700s. America wanted to lay here with Russia, their eyes on the night sky and, occasionally, glancing at each other. Maybe they'd be shoulder to shoulder, not just enjoying the night sky, but enjoying the other's company throughout the otherwise lonely night. The moon would shine down upon them, its solemn stare lighting up the world below as much as it could.

America wouldn't be able to string the right words together to describe how that imaginary night would go. In all honesty, he just saw them, right there, blushing and smiling at each other and the city around them. There would be a comforting feeling buzzing through the air, and America would feel warmth flowing through him as he gazed at Russia, then at the moon, then back to Russia. And America might think about how Russia was more beautiful than any moon. Maybe, near the end of their "stargazing," Russia would turn to him and say those three special words. They were just three words, but they meant so much. Maybe they meant too much. America wasn't even sure if he was ready for those words, if he could handle them. But even if he couldn't handle them, America knew them. He knew what they were from the bottom of his heart. And, in that moment, America finally, truly knew.

America wasn't ready for any sort of relationship, but he loved Russia.

... He loved Russia.

America felt warmth rush through him and smiled at the thought. And, as he once more gazed at the city and sky before him, he felt at peace.

No more headaches, no more voices, just the faint wisps of love fading in and out of America's train of thought.

America could get used to this.

...

But America should've known better.

He should've known that the world is too cruel to let this wonderful dream last.

They never do last in the end, do they?

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Ch 28: Ashes, Ashes, We all fall down \\ The Stardust, Stardust, Stardust

Knock Knock

America's head peeked around the corner to look at the door. He glared at it for a few seconds before shouting, "Come in, it's unlocked!" With that, America ducked into a hiding spot under the couch. America's grand plan was in motion.

You see, after America figured out that he liked Russia, he suddenly decided that no, he was not going to embarrass himself in front of his crush with incohesive blabbering. Also, America didn't want to be lectured on how he didn't eat last night and this morning, which Russia would no doubt find out with his extremely handsome ways. Oh, god, brain, please stop whatever train of thought you're trying to start up. So, anyway, America had this grand plan: run away like a coward.

It's a *great* idea.

America heard the door open and Russia's footsteps. After a few moments of what America could guess was confused silence, Russia called out, "America? Are you in the bathroom or something?"

America heard Russia's footsteps start to head towards America's hotel bathroom and away from America. America inwardly rejoiced and jumped out of his hiding spot, lunging for the door. He was almost there, freedom in front of him, when he felt a hand grab onto his shirt collar. Because of the speed America was going at and the surprising strength of whoever grabbed him, America was yanked backwards into someone's arms. America awkwardly looked up to see a peeved Russian.

"Hi there," America started, glancing at the arms surrounding him,

"I didn't know you wanted to cuddle with me~" America flirted to try and not get flustered himself, a smirk on his face as he gazed back at the now red Russian.

Russia quickly let go of America as the red crept up to his ears, "Sorry about that."

"No problem, now I'm gonna go skedaddle over to the Headquarters," America once again tried to run away and, once again, failed as Russia got a hold of America's collar. Russia gave America a did-you-really-think-you-could-get-away-with-that look and America sighed and turned around to face Russia, resigning to his fate, "Ok. What is it? If it's a lecture, I am 100% ready."

Russia's expression softened, the red on his face creeping away, "I'm not going to lecture you. I just want you to take care of yourself. I don't want you to starve. And if you die, I feel like that's on me."

America looked away, "I just.. I..."

"I understand, it's hard. You think you deserve it. But hey, look at me," Russia gently put his hand on America's cheek and moved America's head so that they were facing each other, "Please try. If you won't try for yourself, try for me. And if you still fail, it isn't your fault, I won't be mad, and I won't, for a single second, like you any less. It isn't wrong to ask for help. I promise you nobody will judge. I won't judge, at least. And, even if they do judge you for getting help, then they aren't your friends and they don't deserve you," Russia gave America a sad smile, "I'm not even sure if I deserve you."

America's eyes widened and he shook his head like crazy, "No! I'm the one who doesn't deserve you! You're amazing and even though I'm literal trash you still care for me and look out for me! You're still my friend even though I'm weak and stupid and-"

Russia silenced America with a hug and whispered, "You're not weak or stupid. You are enough."

America felt Russia's warmth around him and finally noticed the

tears forming in his eyes. God, he's such a crybaby. But he's Russia's crybaby. He hoped so, at least. He hoped with all his heart that the red that was on Russia's cheeks was for him. America hugged Russia back and immediately felt so peaceful. It's just... Russia was so close and America's heart was beating miles a minute and everything felt so *right*.

America immediately felt a brash urge to tell Russia how he felt, right then and there. To spill it all out. To tell Russia how much he wanted to cuddle under the moon with him. Actually, that might be a bit weird.

But before America could muster up any courage, Russia parted from their hug to wipe the loose tears on America's cheeks and whisper firmly, "You are *always* enough."

America nodded, quickly shoving away his thoughts. He couldn't tell Russia right now. If he did, he'd probably just pressure Russia into a relationship he might not even want to be in. As far as America knew, they were just friends and America didn't want a fake relationship. America doesn't even *want* a romantic relationship right now. He wasn't ready for that. Not when he's still fighting demons in his brain.

America smiled gently at Russia, choosing to push away the warmth inside him, "Thanks, Russia." America glanced at the time for a split second and chuckled, "Now might be a good time to go to the Headquarters."

America laughed even harder as Russia also turned to look at the time, paling instantly, "Oh, fuck, we're gonna be late!" America continued to laugh even as Russia grabbed his hand and dragged him to a driver. They scrambled into the car together in stark contrast: Russia terrified while America was still laughing his ass off.

Russia huffed, leaning back onto his chair, "I'm glad you found my horror funny," Even as he said that, though, America could see the traces of a fond smile on his face.

Once America had finally calmed down from his laughing fit, he

muttered, "Ouch, my face and gut hurts."

"That's what you get for laughing at a Russian."

America smiled even though it hurt, looking out the window, "Yeah," America turned to face Russia, "But even you have to admit that it was funny."

Russia huffed again, a large smile visible on his face, "Я проста рады, што ты шчаслівы, мой чароўны дзядок. **(I'm just glad you're happy, my adorable dork.)**"

America frowned, pointing vehemently at Russia, "Hey, no, that's illegal! That isn't Russian, I can't understand that!"

Russia smiled and spoke, a trace of sadness poking into his tone, "And hopefully you never will."

America's frown deepened and he turned to the car window, looking at the awful traffic and the pedestrians walking on the sidewalk. Once the two countries were almost at the headquarters, America quietly asked, "You said something about it's okay to get help, right?"

Russia glanced at America, intrigued and hopeful, "Yeah, what about it?"

America clenched his dress pants and turned to face Russia, apprehension building inside him. Even with all that apprehension, however, one hopeful look from Russia was all that it took for all that apprehension to melt away.

Russia cared so, so much. This was the least America could do.

"If you truly want to, I- I'm willing to give help a chance," America mumbled, starting to look down at his lap, "And by that, I mean that we can go to the doctors or a therapist tonight if you want to. I just... I want to try living again and I want to trust you so this is the best way to do it, right?"

America looked up to see Russia trying not to cry. Russia immediately surrounded America with a hug. America smiled,

wrapping his arms around his crush.

"Thank you so, so much."

--x--

With the meeting over and done with, America immediately started walking towards Russia.

When the two of them had barged in just a couple hours earlier, UN had given them a yelling to remember. When UN was done, he simply pointed at their seats as a way of saying "get out of my fucking face and don't show up late ever again." Not to mention, he also looked like a sleepless, grumbling, peeved parent, which is always a nice and rare sight to see. You see, America has noticed throughout the years that UN had different "moods" depending on how much sleep he had gotten. This mood meant he had, at most, three hours of sleep. Nevertheless, America would've loved to have UN as a Dad. No offense to Britain, but somehow UN is unbelievably funny when he's mad while Britain is just plain frustrating. Maybe it's because UN is not afraid to whip his hands around like a maniac to prove his point when he's mad, America will never truly know. But now that the meeting was over, America was free from any and all parental authority, whether it came from Britain, France, or UN. Honestly, parental authority and the lack of control on the child's part is probably why America wanted freedom so badly and rebelled against his Dad. Correction: it *is* the reason America rebelled against his Dad.

Once America had finally gotten close enough to Russia, he opened his mouth to speak only to stop mid-word. All of a sudden, boundless pain hit America all at once. It was worse than 9/11. It was worse than Pearl Harbor, and it was worse than the Civil War. It didn't feel like he got attacked or bombed or split, it was something else much, much worse. And America knew what it was: something- no, *someone* inside him was dying. America felt tears form in his eyes as the world around him became blurry.

"AMERICA!"

Before America comprehend that someone familiar was yelling his

name, the ground suddenly rushed up to America and the breath was knocked out of him as he harshly hit the ground. America felt so much pain he could barely stay conscious. He could barely see through the tears and pain. He no longer felt his sunglasses on his face, but America couldn't say he cared anymore. What was the point?

Red and white stardust. Red and white stardust.

America felt someone pick him up and place him on their lap.

Bullets, blood, stardust. Bullets, blood, stardust.

America could've sworn someone was speaking and desperately trying to get his attention, but he didn't care anymore.

What was the point?

Black eyes, white eyes. White eyes, dead eyes.

America went limp, grief and pain overwhelming him. Tears rolled down his cheeks as his heart started to break.

Gold, white, navy blue. Red, white, navy blue.

"I d-didn't- I-I- I d-didn't w-want to k-kill them-! I-" Said a familiar voice drifting through the remains of America's consciousness.

'Liar,' America thought, even more tears flooding his eyes.

Stardust, stardust, stardust. Stardust, stardust, stardust.

Bullets, blood, tears. Bullets, blood, tears.

Red, white, blue. Red, white, blue.

And it's all **his** fault.

But it's also his, too, isn't it?

His fault, his fault. **His** fault, his fault.

Ring around the rosies, Pockets full of posies. Ashes, Ashes, We all fall down...

Ring around the rosies, Pockets full of posies. Ashes, Ashes, We all fall down...

As tears poured like a river down America's cheeks, everything finally faded to black.

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Ch 29: ...---... \\ ...---...

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Sounds of yelling could be heard in the next room. Just a few moments earlier, everything had been peaceful. It was just like any other day. But then the yelling started, and it frustratingly hasn't stopped yet.

Hawaii opened her eyes, noticing the way the (fake) morning light streamed into the living room. She felt tired and weak. She held her hand in front of her face, seeing the ever-growing cracks on her hands and arms. Unlike many others, however, she could still walk and stand up. Many others couldn't anymore, being bedridden and unable to move. Hawaii felt awful for them, but there wasn't much *she* could do, anyway.

Hawaii stood up and stumbled over to where the sounds of yelling were coming from. She stopped walking when she reached the archway that separated the foyer from the living room. She leaned against the wall, peering into the room to see North Carolina and a few other states- Penn, South Carolina, Montana, Kansas, and Arkansas to name a few- by the door while Massachusetts and DC were facing them. The two groups were fighting.

North Carolina growled under his breath, "You two are idiots. Killing Rhode Island is our only option. We've waited for too long already. There's no other solution and you know it."

DC looked desperate, "You can't just kill Rhi, you have no guarantee that they'll keep their word! If we can just figure out who the traitor is, then we can win this, I know we can!"

Penn cast a sympathetic look at DC, "I understand you and Rhode Island have been best friends for a long time, but if sacrificing her life means saving everyone else, then I'm willing to do it."
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"No, you don't understand, Penn!-"

North Carolina stepped forward, an angry glare situated on his face, "No, *you* don't understand. We're doing what has to be done. If you aren't willing to see that, then just stay behind and don't come in our way," North's gaze grazed over all the states who, just like Hawaii, were watching and doing nothing, "Plus, The fact that there are so many doing nothing to stop us should tell you exactly what they all think of this."

North Carolina stood there for a few seconds, probably expecting DC to stay something. Instead, DC stood there, glancing in visible sorrow at all the states that were watching just like North said. Hawaii was taken aback by how sad, shocked, and desperate he looked. Hawaii felt pity swell inside her heart. She hated this. She hated every single second of this. She wanted to say something, anything, but she found her mouth was glued shut. What could she say? She would be lying if she was on DC's side. She just... she wanted everyone, including Rhi, to be happy. If Rhi died- Hawaii almost choked on tears at the thought- then wouldn't she finally be free from Confederacy's control?

Receiving no answer, North Carolina grimly turned heel and left, the states on his side following him. Almost all of the neutral states who were watching turned to solemnly leave as well. They wouldn't aid in killing Rhi, but they weren't going to stop her death either. It was horrible and everyone knew it.

When everyone except Hawaii and Massachusetts was gone, DC fell to his knees. Hawaii's eyes widened when she noticed his cracked hands. With tears pouring down his cheeks, DC hit his fist against the floor, his hand cracking even more from the force of the blow. Hawaii flinched at the violence and at the sight of small bits of stardust detaching themselves from DC's hand and dancing upwards into the air. DC started curling up into a ball and yelled, "Those idiots!" DC choked on a sob, "They've killed us all..."

Killed us... all? Hawaii finally felt words form in her mouth, "What do you mean?"

DC sharply turned to see Hawaii before he sat up and looked at

Hawaii with red eyes, "We're already cracked enough... if Rhode Island dies while we're all like this... it might tip Dad over the edge," DC choked on a sob, "By killing Rhi, we might accidentally kill Dad in the process."

Hawaii's eyes widened and her gaze shot towards the door. Kill... Dad? Which would mean... Hawaii stumbled forward, almost falling down. Luckily, she caught herself last second. She had to do something now. She couldn't just sit there. She had to stop them. She knew she could.

Because... Everyone's lives were on the line now.

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North Carolina waded through the murky darkness of America's nightmares. The clearing was just up ahead, they were almost there. Today was the day where they would make a decision and never be able to come back from it. Today was the day that would decide their fates. And North was not gonna let everyone die. '*I'm so sorry, Rhode Island, but we have to.*'

The group entered the clearing to see PR alone, his signature hoodie still covering his face. PR turned to face them, his stance apprehensive. North Carolina wasn't going to explain why they were there- PR would know since he's one of them. After a few moments of tension sizzling in the air, Rhi showed up behind PR, a gun in her hand. She stepped forward, speaking for her cowardly master, "What do you want?" Her voice was very noticeably monotone.

North growled, "I'm taking up your awful offer, you bastard. I'm going to kill my sister," The words felt more bitter than what North thought they would be. He didn't want to do this. I mean, who would? But, he had to. He had to protect his siblings. He had to protect everyone, and this was the only way North Carolina knew how. When this was over with, North's gonna find some way to beat Confederacy and PR to a pulp. He's going to make them pay for forcing him to do this.

North shakily inhaled and pulled out a gun, aiming it straight at

Rhi's head. Upon the sight of a gun, PR jerked forward towards North Carolina, panicked. This time, he spoke for himself, "Wait, what are you doing?!"

Despite PR's surprise, North steeled himself for what he was about to do. Hopefully, DC will forgive him one day, though North knows it'll be hard. North closed his eyes. One bullet. Straight in the heart. Hopefully, it'll be a painless death. North slowly pulled on the trigger-

A female voice shouted out, "NORTH, NO!-"

BANG! BANG!

The sound of two shots flooded the clearing.

... Fate is cruel.

North had been an idiot. While North closed his eyes, Rhi was jerked into action by PR's sudden panic, jerkily and sloppily aiming at North Carolina. Rhi pulled on the trigger when she heard someone yell.

But North wasn't the one who got hit.

A gun clattered onto the floor.

"NO!" North's shriek split the air as he fell on his knees, quickly picking up the fallen state.

Hawaii.

Her red skin shimmered with blood as she gagged and struggled to breathe. North felt terror and panic shoot through him. She was the one who screamed for them to stop. Not only that, but she had flung herself in front of North to save him. North looked down at her body to see blood flooding out of her neck, where the bullet hit. He saw as the life drained out of her eyes. Panicking, he looked up at his fellow states, "SOMEONE GET HELP!"

Feeling her moving, North Carolina quickly turned back to her, tears threatening to fall down his cheeks. Oh god, oh god. He clung

onto her small, bloody hand, "No, no, no, no, Hawaii, please stay with me, stay with me, sis..." North felt tears rolling down his cheeks as he desperately begged Hawaii to stay with him. He was the one who was supposed to take the hit. Why? Why? WHY?

Hawaii hand slipped out of North's grasp, limp.

North felt the whole world stop around him, "Hawaii?" He said gently, grabbing her hand again and gripping onto her body, hoping to get some sort of reaction, "Hawaii?" Slowly, what just happened slowly dawned on North Carolina.

His sister was dead.

All because of him.

North heard a panicked cry. He softly and tenderly put Hawaii's hand on her chest. He looked up to see the one who had cried out had been PR. PR kept glancing between Hawaii and something else while quickly whispering to himself on repeat, "WhathaveIdonewhathaveIdone," North numbly followed PR's gaze to see Rhi, feeling his heart drop again.

There was a red gunshot wound on her chest. She stood there for a second, silent, as the blood poured out of the wound and into her clothes. Then, something unexpected happened. Her pitch-black eyes faded back to white. Her expression morphed into one of pain and shock. Her hands shot to her mouth as she stumbled forward, vomiting blood. She fell onto her hands and knees, her tears hitting the floor as more and more blood poured out of her.

PR watched in pure horror at his two dying siblings. He couldn't breathe, he couldn't move. He didn't think... He didn't think that would happen. It was all his fault. He was so panicked that he lost control of Rhi. Why had he done that?! Now Rhi was in pain and it was all his fault. Hawaii was dead and it was all his fault! He didn't want to... he didn't want to do that! He didn't want to kill anyone except Dad he- He never wanted this! He just wanted to relieve Rhi of her pain not... not this! Oh no, oh no, oh no...

He was an awful person.

He was an awful brother.

Rhi's body collapsed to the ground and PR flinched. She looked up, tears in her eyes from the pain, and said, "How- how could you?" PR suddenly wanted to run. Rhi's expression wavered for a moment and understanding dawned on her as she looked into her new and overwhelming memories. Rhi looked straight at PR, pity and sorrow flooding her eyes, "Te perdono... y siento mucho lo que hicimos ..."

PR felt tears leave his eyes. She... she... did she really mean it? Did she really mean it? Has everything been for nothing?

No... it wasn't for nothing. What she said doesn't change anything. It doesn't excuse what they did and what they're doing. It doesn't excuse his pain. It doesn't excuse those countless nights that PR spent waiting for help that never came. It doesn't excuse the fact that they ignored his cries. It doesn't excuse how many times they've used him for stupid publicity...

It never will.

...But his argument works for both sides now, doesn't it?

Penn, shaking himself out of his shocked state, noticed PR's distracted state. Enraged, Penn took his chance, grabbing his knife at charging at PR. PR heard footsteps and willed himself to turn just in time to see Penn charging straight for him, murder in his eyes. PR quickly attempted to dodge, but Penn was too close.

PR fell down on the floor, a large cut on his left arm. He fell so harshly on the floor that his hood was jostled from its location on PR's head and fell down, revealing exactly who PR was.

South Carolina gasped and said in shock, "...Puerto Rico?"

In response to hearing his name, Puerto Rico scrambled backwards, glancing back at his siblings' now-dead bodies. He winced when he saw their bodies crack and shatter into flecks of stardust. North Carolina slumped over what was left of Hawaii's corpse, tears clearly on his face. Puerto Rico felt a small shred of pity for the state, but it quickly faded away in his mountains of shock and grief.

This wasn't how things were supposed to go, and it was all his fault. All his fault, all his fault.

Puerto Rico suddenly felt someone yank him backwards by the hood of his hoodie. Puerto Rico looked up to see his partner, Confederacy.

Confederacy glanced at the scene in front of him, yanking Puerto Rico onto his feet with a large grin, "Well what do you know? A yankee *and* a ton of useless islands died! My plan worked better than I ever thought it could."

Penn's eyes widened, his face melting into one of confusion and dread. Rhi was their greatest weapon, why were they so happy with the fact that she died? Well, why was Confederacy so happy with the fact that she died? What was going on? What are they planning?! And... why did Puerto Rico look so confused?

Confederacy smirked at the yankee before him, "Well, I think it's time for us to take our leave. As I proclaimed into the deal I offered, I promise that we will not attack America's psyche anymore," Confederacy suddenly broke out into laughter, quickly calming himself with a large grin that oozed victory. Even though Penn couldn't understand what was going on in Confederacy's brain, he could tell that whatever had happened, Confederacy had won. He had found a way to win. But... how?!

Confederacy continued, gesturing towards a guilty-looking Puerto Rico, "As my friend here would say, ¡Adiós, idiotas! **(Goodbye, idiots!)**"

With a dramatic hand gesture, Confederacy was swallowed by the darkness of the nightmares surrounding them. A feeling of incredible loss fell onto each state. They had done what they had set out to do and freed everyone from Confederacy's attacks but... why do they feel like they lost?

Penn turned his head at the sound of footsteps. A second later, DC ran in with the rest of the thirteen colonies and a collection of other states who were strong enough to accompany him. DC immediately stopped when he saw the remnants of tears, blood, and stardust

scattering the floor. DC clenched his fist in anger and went up to the nearest state, who just happened to be Kansas, and slapped him. Hard.

"YOU IDIOTS!" DC yelled, tears rolling down his cheeks, "YOU! You! You... you just killed Dad..."

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The minute they were alone, Puerto Rico fell to the floor, shaking. Confederacy moved to comfort him, only to be greeted with yelling, "NO! No-! D-don't- w-why..."

Confederacy sat next to Puerto Rico, putting a hand on his shoulder to try and comfort the shaking country. Puerto Rico shook off his hand as tears flowed down his cheeks, "I d-didn't- I-I- I d-didn't w-want to k-kill them-! I-"

Confederacy once again put his hand on Puerto Rico's shoulder, "Hey, it's okay. Look at me, okay?"

While still shaking, Puerto Rico looked at his partner. Confederacy had a small smile on his face, but Puerto Rico could barely see it through his tears. Confederacy continued, "Everything's okay, I promise. Hawaii and Rhode Island are finally okay now. None of this is your fault, it's North Carolina's fault for pushing you. You were just caught off guard and surprised by him. Not only that, but you didn't order Rhi to shoot, she did that on her own in reaction to your emotions," The Confederate scoffed, "I told you that puppets are nuisances."

Confederacy pat his partner's back lightly, "It isn't your fault. Tell me, who abandoned you after hurricane Maria and led you to me?"

Puerto Rico suddenly couldn't breathe. Oh, god. He didn't want to go back to that hell, he didn't want his people to go back to that hell. He remembered that hell all too well. The trees shaking, the water rushing in, and the Coquí frogs going silent, even though they never have before. They wanted to become birds, right? In those moments, it must've been so bad that even they no longer wanted to fly into the sky. And the days and weeks and months that

followed... He didn't want to go back. Never. Never again.

Confederacy tapped Puerto Rico on the shoulder, startling him out of his thoughts. Confederacy's voice was low and expectant, "Answer me, Puerto Rico. Who abandoned you after Maria?"

Puerto Rico took a shaky breath in, "Dad."

"And...?"

Puerto Rico gulped, looking down at the ground, "... my siblings."

Confederacy nodded, his expression trying to form a comforting smile but not exactly getting the details right, "Exactly. And that means it doesn't matter what happens to them anymore, okay? They abandon us, we abandon them back, easy peasy. They aren't our family anymore. They never really were." Confederacy's smile widened, "We can be free from them, just like you said."

Puerto Rico forced himself to calm down. He didn't like Confederacy, he never really had. But, in that moment, he so desperately wanted to believe what he said. He needed comfort- any comfort. He didn't care who he got it from right now. He just... he needed someone to lean on. If it just so happened to be his "brother" but not really brother, then that's fine.

He's fine. It wasn't his fault. It wasn't. He couldn't have known what would've happened, he doesn't have future vision or anything like that. He couldn't have stopped all that. It isn't his fault that- that his sisters died. It isn't. It can't be...

Confederacy, noticing Puerto Rico's change of heart, smiled just a little bit wider, "C'mon, family hug?"

Puerto Rico glanced at Confederacy, actually pondering the suggestion for a moment, before shaking his head no, "I'm good. Thank you for the offer, though." Puerto Rico looked away from Confederacy, obviously still shaken up.

The Confederate stood up, "Anytime, *brother*." Confederacy's teeth flashed. For a split second, Confederacy's comforting smile twisted. In that one, small moment his smile became cruel, manipulative,

and apathetic, only to twist back into a comforting smile as he walked away.

Puerto Rico would never know. He would never know how little Confederacy actually cared for his feelings... and his pitiful life.

Once the shocked and grieving Puerto Rico was out of view, Confederacy pulled an hourglass out of his pocket, twirling it between his fingers. With a twisted, smug smile forming on his face, Confederacy watched the top empty of sand.

As soon as the top emptied, the world around Confederacy started to shake. Confederacy started laughing, "I wonder how long..." He burst into another set of cackling, "I wonder how long you'll hold out, Yankee!"

Confederacy turned the hourglass over and he put it down on the ground. He smirked to himself, "I suppose only time will tell..."

His teeth flashed in the dim light.

"Only time will tell who'll end up winning this cruel game in the end."

Ch 30 Pt 1: A Story from Me to You

Before we start this chapter, I want to say a few things. This chapter was originally going to be about double this size, but it was starting to get too long so I split it in two. Thus, there will be a second part to this.

Secondly, I tried to base some of the events of this chapter on real events in history with some creative liberties taken, of course. If you ever feel like it, feel free to search up the events in this chapter, I tried to be as accurate as possible.

-Selva

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Ba-dump

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~1515

I tried to wet my mouth in the heat. I felt tired, and if I could I would've stopped to rest my aching feet, maybe even drink some water that I so desperately wanted.

But I didn't have that luxury.

I tightened my grip on my mother's hand. We were running, fleeing. From what, I had no idea. I glanced around at the people fleeing with us. They were mom's people. They looked hungry, tired, and desperate. But even so, they had a fire in their eyes I couldn't describe even if I tried to.
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I glanced at the rainforest around us. Its unknown depths seemed to reach out at me. Scared, I asked in a tongue long lost to time, "How much farther?"

My mother, called Borikén by the others, looked back at me with a pained expression, "I do not know," She gripped my hand tighter, looking straight ahead, "Come on, we must hurry if we are to reach the boats in time."

She quickened her pace and I was dragged along. I kept on tripping and stumbling, but she only kept on walking faster, a fearful look on her face. I saw relief wash over her as we reached the coast, where a few boats were bobbing by the shore. We quickly ran down to the boats and my mother started lifting small children onto the boats. When she had no one left to lift up to the boats, she hurriedly picked me up to put me on the boats as well.

BANG!

With the sudden noise, my mother cried out in pain and dropped me. I saw her left arm shoot out to cover a hole that had suddenly appeared in her right arm. Meanwhile, I went face-first into the sand. As I scrambled back to my feet in confusion and concern for my mother, she yelled for everyone to sail away as quickly as possible. Complying with my mother's wishes, our people started pushing the boats away from the shore. The minute she saw our people starting to run away, my mother's head jerked towards a man at the edge of the clearing, a weird, long stick in his hands. She growled as she moved between me and the man to protect me, *"Spain."*

My eyes widened and I cowered behind my mother. The bad man. That was the bad man everyone talked about.

His face twisted into a smirk as he gripped his long stick, "Bueno, bueno, bueno, ¿qué me escondes, Borikén querida?"

My mother's eyes flashed with rage as she continued to grip her arm. My eyes widened when I saw blood dripping down from the place she was holding. "*No* soy tu querida," I heard my mother hiss out as she eyed the line of the forest before us.

The bad man's face suddenly became very serious, and I felt chills ripple down my spine. He spoke in a low, dangerous tone, "Creo que tienes algo que me pertenece."

I saw anger once again flash on my mother's face. But it was more than that. I could've sworn I saw fear there, too. She whispered so that only I could hear, "Run while I distract him."

"Mom?" I whispered. Pain flashed in her eyes and I could see tears threatening to fall.

"No matter what you hear or see, just keep on running, ok? I'll be right behind you," She said softly, her voice slightly cracking. I nodded, bracing myself. The minute I heard them start to speak in the bad man language again, I sprinted for the trees. Noticing me running, the bad man yelled in surprise and commanded, "¡Consiguele! ¡Captúralo!"

"Run!" My mother yelled, "Run and don't look back! Run as fast as you can, don't worry about me! Just run!" I ran faster towards the trees.

"¡Mocosa insolente! ¡Debería haber hecho esto hace mucho tiempo!" I heard the bad man say, followed by a loud "*bang!"* that seemed to echo throughout my head. I reached the treeline and cast a quick look over my shoulder, expecting my mother to be right behind me.

I shouldn't have looked back.

My mother was supposed to be running behind me; but instead, she was on the ground, blood pouring out of a hole in her skull. I cried out in grief and shock, stumbling backwards and shaking my head in disbelief. With tears rolling down my cheeks, I quickly turned tail and ran.

"Run! Run and don't look back!"

And so I did. I ran and ran and ran through the trees. But no matter how far I ran and no matter how tired my legs got, I still heard the rustling of leaves and bushes behind me as the bad men barreling straight through the underbrush just to get to me. Why they didn't

use their long, dangerous sticks, I have no idea.

But as I kept on running, my legs started refusing to cooperate. They screamed at me to stop and rest, but I couldn't do that, they were still behind me. But as my legs grew tired, I started stumbling more and more, letting the bad men close the gap between us. I suddenly felt a hand grab me forcefully by the arm and yank me back. I immediately struggled, only for my arms to be constrained behind me. The bad men turned me around forced me to walk forward until we eventually met up with the big group of bad men at the shore, Spain at the center and looking fairly bored. When he saw me, a pleased grin formed on his face and he started walking towards me. But even as he came closer, I felt my eyes drift towards the body of my mother, still there on the shore. I wanted to cry. I wanted to throw up. I didn't want to be here, this was all just a cruel nightmare and I'll wake up in my mother's arms any moment now, I just know it.

But even as Spain came close enough for us to touch, I didn't wake up. This cruel reality didn't fade away for me to wake up in my mother's safe arms and cry about this horror. No, this was real. I didn't need a medicine man to know. I could see it in her dead eyes. Her cold, dead eyes that once held so much warmth for me and her people. My mother was dead, her body treated like no more than garbage. My legs felt weak and I collapsed to the floor, Spain smirking down at me.

Spain leaned over me, seemingly delighted by my misery. He kneeled down, grabbed my chin, and forced me to stand up and look him in the eyes. I felt fear flood through me. He inspected me for a few moments before coolly smiling again, "¿Viste eso? Todo esto es solo una muestra de cómo es el mundo exterior: no dudaré en aplastarte como el pequeño insecto que eres," His smile quickly vanished as he muttered, "Desearía nunca haber tenido esa aventura con tu madre."

He let me go harshly and started walking. Before I could fall, however, the bad men surrounding me forced me to walk by harshly shoving me with their long death sticks. Terrified for my life and shocked to silence by grief, I followed Spain in pure, silent horror.

As we continued to walk, however, one bad man went up to Spain and asked something, "¿Cómo se llamará?"

Spain glanced at me with an emotionless and uncaring expression and replied, "Puerto Rico," His chilling eyes dwelled on me for a split second before he looked at the bad man who had asked him the question, "porque eso es todo lo que él será para mí."

--x--

~1520

Through the leather of my small black boots, I felt the cobblestone streets as I raced through San Juan. I was tempted to take off the weird, clunky things before I decided against it. The townspeople would hate it if I did, and they always found out. And, if Spain came around, they'd totally tell him all about how I took my shoes like the "barbarian" I am. Not risking it. Not today. Not when today was such a momentous occasion.

Just today, a Spanish boat came into the harbor telling of a new decree: As of this year, 1520, all Taino Indians were free- My mother's people were finally free! I was so happy. I hated seeing them toil around and not being able to do anything about it. I hated seeing their faces, so terribly tired, mad, and worn down. I hated it. The vague memories of their happy faces just years earlier rang through my head. The stories my mother would tell of before the Spanish ever came were always the best. When I was very little, I would spend hours dreaming of what those days were like. But then again, I never had the pleasure of seeing those supposedly joyful days.

... Since I have the disgrace of having Spain as my father.

My face scrunched up and I ran faster, the commoners on the street yelling at me to stop running. All of sudden, I slammed into something. No, someone. Upon impact into this other person, I stumbled backwards and fell down onto my butt. I looked up and felt fear strike a chord all throughout my body.

Suddenly, I couldn't breathe. Couldn't speak. Couldn't move.

Couldn't hear. Couldn't feel. It was him. You could recognize him anywhere. Those cruel eyes that glared at me with the fury of all of Jurakán's* hurricanes. That red and white crossed flag that anyone with a brain could recognize. Spain.

His eyes grazed judgingly over me before he took a quick glance at his fancy military clothes, checking for stains. Finding none, He scowled, "Tienes mucha suerte de que no haya manchas. **(You're awfully lucky for there to be no stains.)**"

But even with this comment, I knew that this wasn't the end of this conversation. Spain always took things too far. Way too far. Memories started bubbling to the surface and fear continued to fester in my soul. What cruel punishment will it be this time? What awful thing does he have in store? I could practically feel the blood that will surely be running down his nose any moment now.

Spain's furious face, as expected, did not recede as he continued to speak, "Pero aun así, el hecho de que tengas la audacia de toparte conmigo de todas las personas necesita ser tratado. **(But even so, the fact that you have the audacity to run into me of all people needs to be dealt with.)**" Spain's face twisted into a cruel smile that sent fear spiraling throughout my heart. I wanted to run so badly, but my feet would not budge. Oh god, oh god. Why hadn't I listened when I had heard the news that a ship had come from Spain?! All I thought about was my mother's people, I never even considered the fact that Spain might've been on that ship, too!

Spain's cruel smile grew when he saw the fear shown so obviously on my face, "Oh, no te veas tan asustado... Deberías haberlo visto venir. Esto es lo que sucede cuando actúas así. No puedo tener un hijo indisciplinado ahora, ¿verdad? Eso sería una desgracia. **(Oh, don't look so afraid... You should've seen this coming. This is what happens when you act like this. I can't have an undisciplined son now, can I? That would be a disgrace.)**"

Spain harshly grabbed me by the arm and I cried out in surprise. Suddenly, my voice returned to me as tears threatened to fall down my cheeks, "¡Por favor, prometo que nunca lo volveré a hacer! ¡Nunca! Te lo ruego, por favor no me castiges, lo siento! **(Please, I promise I'll never do it again! Never! I beg you, please don't**

punish me, I'm sorry!)"

Spain's fury, however, only seemed to triple at the sound of my begging. His grip became so strong that I cried out in pain. Spain pulled me to him by his arm and looked me straight in the eyes, making me shake in pure terror, "Los españoles *no* mendigan. **(The Spanish do *not* beg.)**"

And, Spain's grip somehow tightening furthur, Spain dragged me across town to the small house that was given to me by Spain himself. Correction: Spain locked me up in here for two weeks before declaring that this house was mine and I had to fend on my own. Spain slammed open the door and, with his countryhuman strength, threw me into the house and straight into the wall.

I felt pain reverberate through my body. You'd think that I'd get used to this feeling after a few years, but I haven't. In my pain, I barely noticed Spain walking up to me and kneeing me straight in the gut.

"Hrrk!" I grunted, clutching my gut and collapsing onto the floor, coughing up blood. I didn't need to look at the floor to know, the familiar taste of blood in my mouth was enough. I looked pleadingly at Spain, hoping that he wouldn't strike me again.

Spain continued to glare at my bruised and battered body before turning around to leave the room. Before he left, however, he spoke again, not even bothering to look at me, "Sabes, si tu gente no te hubiera gustado tanto...**(You know, if your people hadn't taken such a liking to you...)**"

He turned his head to face me, his eyes glinting in the sunlight, "Ya te habría matado. **(I would've killed you by now.)**"

And with those words, he left, his boots tapping on the wooden floor. I watched him leave, trembling in horror. I weakly scrambled back, pain burning throughout my body. I glanced down at the bloody floor and felt like crying.

Why...

Why do I deserve all this pain?

*Jurakán: A Taíno zemí. He is always angry and controls the power of Hurricanes.

--x--

September 25, 1625

Fire.

Fire is such a fickle thing.

One minute, it cooks your food and gives you light and warmth. The other, it's warmth swallows all around it, destroying and destroying. It's so beautiful, but so, so cruel.

I felt tears flowing down my cheeks. I was more than a hundred years old, and yet I was crying.

San Juan was burning. The cruel flames had swallowed it whole. The Dutch had come and threatened to burn the city if we didn't surrender. The Spanish- and my people- chose not to back down, and now the city was burning. *Our home* was burning. Why? Why?!

Why had my people fought for Spain? Why had they fought for that cruel tyrant? Why didn't they give up? Now, our homes were burning to the ground. Now, Everything was burning. Everything.

Wait...

Fear shot through me.

Everything was burning, which meant...

Oh no...

Please, no...

Before I knew it, my legs were moving and I was running straight into San Juan. I heard my people yell for me to come back and get away from the fire, but I couldn't go back.

I couldn't.

I avoided the licking flames the best I could and found great success at dodging them. I suppose Spain hitting me all the time helped me to learn how to dodge. I ran and ran until I reached my house. I felt tears sting my eyes as I saw the old cottage that had served me so well for a hundred years, before running past it to the nearby brush.

When I reached the bushes at the edge of my house, I dropped to my knees at the sight, despite the flames around me.

The underbrush was burning, but that wasn't what caused me to fall to my knees. What caused me to fall to my knees was the small- now burning- dugout canoe poking out from underneath the bushes. The world around me became blurry as tears poured out of my eyes like miniature rivers. It was gone. It was gone forever.

That canoe wasn't just any canoe, it was the small dugout canoe that my mother had loved so dearly when she was alive. When I had discovered it by the shore a hundred years earlier, I couldn't believe it. So, I took it, cleaned it up, and kept it hidden. It was what was left of my mother, and I wanted to preserve it for all time so that I would always have a scrap of her with me.

But the world truly is cruel, because now that dugout canoe is burning amongst the flames. Now, it was gone. Gone forever. Why was the world so cruel? And, despite the flames that started to lick by my feet, I didn't budge. I had felt worse. Spain had made me feel worse than what some pitiful flames could do to me.

There was no use fighting the flames, was there? It would just keep on burning and without water, I have no way to stop it.

Maybe it's the same with Spain... maybe I really can't fight back.

Because I don't have a bucket of water at my disposal.

--x--

~1760s

I let out a small yell as I was flung into the cell, my back roughly

hitting the rock wall of the fort. I felt the rock floor jolt my entire body as I slammed into it, probably scraping up my arms really bad. The iron door of the cell closed with a creak and I heard my father Spain yelling at me that this was my punishment... Or something along those lines. I don't bother to listen to his fury anymore. He's always mad at me for doing something, and it's difficult to track what I've done wrong this time.

Realizing I was still awkwardly lying on the floor, I positioned myself so I was leaning against the back wall. My eyes flitted across the cell and I saw small pieces of graffiti here and there on the cell walls. There were even a few drawings of boats scraped into the walls. I raised an eyebrow at them. Those were recent. I wondered who made them, they weren't bad drawings at all.

Ever since my nice little cottage in San Juan burned down, Spain made it so that I was living in the fort "overseeing" the fort and city. It's clear that he doesn't trust me- I don't trust him either- but everyone argued that I deserved it for "helping get rid of the Dutch." For one, I didn't really help, my people did. Secondly, I hate all of you. But, when Spain gave me the glare, I ended up agreeing anyway.

It's been around 350 years since my mother died when I was seven, but every day since then I've been terrified of Spain. I hate my "father" with a burning passion, but whenever he looks my way, terror fills my entire body. Every day he isn't here is heaven on earth, but each day he is here is hell. Sometimes, I wonder if the other Spanish colonies are terrified of him like I am, but it's not like I can ever ask them. I'm trapped on this small island, after all. Well, I'm also trapped in this small cell currently.

Honestly, this isn't the first time I've been locked up for stupid reasons, and it definitely won't be the last. Whenever Spain comes around, I'm always locked up for no good reason or beaten up. Personally, I prefer the former. At this point, I'm pretty sure he just hates looking at me and acknowledging my existence, not that I really care. Even though he's my dad, I don't care for his well being and he doesn't care for mine. It's mutual. We both equally hate each other and want to rip each other's throats out, but he keeps me around for the money and I keep him around because I'm goddamn

terrified of him.

I sighed and closed my eyes to take a nap. I might as well make the most of this free time, right?

--x--

~1774

I was cleaning my gun when I heard someone run into the room. It was a soldier I was fond of, Adrián. He looked a bit tired and worn out.

"What's going on?" I asked.

He gave me a pitying glance, "Your father is here."

I clicked my tongue, not really interested, as I finished cleaning my gun and put it where it belonged, "Really? I haven't seen him in a while. Do you know why?"

Adrián cast me a confused glance, "You don't know?"

My eyes flicked towards him, "What is it?"

Adrián looked away, "Surely you've heard..." Adrián sighed before continuing, "It's the Spanish Republic guy, Spain's kid. Your brother." Adrián's eyes flicked nervously between me and the floor.

Adrián's nervous actions started to- admittedly- make me genuinely interested in the conversation, "So? What about him?"

"He was in control for like the past year but recently... Spain- your dad- shot him in the head. He killed his own son. What kind of a father does that?" Adrián looked at me once again, a distressed expression on his face.

Oh, that made sense. That sounds like a Spain move to me. I responded evenly, "Definitely not a good one. But, yeah, that sounds like a move my good old 'Dad' would make. For him, family is nothing more than people to be used *and* possible heirs. As long as he still has one 'pure-blooded kid' to take as his heir, he'll kill a

thousand other sons to keep himself in power."

Adrián looked horrified by that. He shivered and muttered, "God, I should've stayed at home."

"You would've starved at home," I butt in.

"Yeah," Adrián assented, "I would've, but sometimes I'd like to think that would be an easier option than standing out here and hoping to God that I won't have to shoot anyone. I wasn't made for fighting."

I frowned at that, "Trust me when I say that I wasn't either."

"Then how come you're so good at it now?"

Spain. Spain's the only reason. I can still feel how much it hurt to have him hit me or fling me across rooms for doing just the slightest things wrong. How he stole everything and crushed every small hope of mine like it was some sort of funny game. I glanced back at Adrián, sorrow in my soul, "Experience. Lots and lots of experience."

...

I heard the wooden door open behind me. I didn't need to turn around to know who it was.

"How come you weren't at my greeting?" I could practically hear Spain's cruel smile from here.

"I was busy," I replied simply, preventing myself from looking at him. The minute I looked at Spain, it would be all over. My confidence would crumble, I just knew it.

I heard the tapping of his shoes coming closer and swallowed down my fear as I continued to work diligently on the papers in front of me. I felt his careful watch burning into me, constricting my every movement. What was he trying to do? What will he do now? What will he do?!

I barely noticed how tightly I had been gripping the papers and my quill until I heard Spain snicker behind me. Quickly snapping out of my trance, I forced my voice to sound even as I asked, "What's so

funny?"

After a few seconds of silence, my heart jumped as a hand reached out, grabbed my collar, and dragged me up to my feet, forcing me to face Spain. Spain coolly grinned at me as my heart dropped, "When I speak to you, you will look me in the eyes, got it? There's no avoiding eye contact here."

I nodded, shaking, and Spain let me go. He walked to my desk, skimming over the papers before facing me again as if nothing had happened, "I came to talk to your mistake of an existence to remind you of something," Spain started, his eyes wild and unpredictable, "You must know by now that your brother took control from me for a year, right?"

"Yes?-" I got cut off as I say the knife that Spin started twirling around his fingers. He narrowed his eyes at me before he took a solid grip of the knife.

"The fact he took power changes *nothing*, got that?" Spain looked furious as he started walking threateningly towards me, knife in hand, "If I'm being honest here, I cared more about your brother than I ever will care about your *sorry, half-bred ass.* Don't you *fucking dare* to pull a move like your brother or I will actually *murder* you. Even though you are my 'son' I will *never* see you as such, got it? Oh, and, if you ever fail me, you'll be the one bleeding out onto the floor with a bullet through your brain." His crazy eyes locked on to mine, "*Never* fail me or do anything your idiotic brother did, or you're dead *fucking* meat."

I nodded, scared, as I eyed Spain's knife, ready to dodge it at any given notice just in case he wanted to go for my head. After a few moments of tense silence, Spain backed off, scoffed, and stormed out the room. I let out a breath of relief, practically falling onto the floor.

Only one question dwelled in my mind: What might happen to me if I failed Spain?

I hoped with all my heart I wouldn't live to find that out.

--x--

~1898

I heard the two voices in the other room talking and occasionally yelling. I was shaking in uncontrollable fear. I had failed. I had failed in my one and only job. We had lost the war.

Against an American, of all things.

Boarded up fear began to pour out of me as my mind went over all the possible punishments Spain would do after his chat with the American. I was so close to gaining autonomy, I was so goddamn close- What would Spain do to me now? How would he punish me? As I went over each punishment mentally, I felt my fear increase and increase, its chokehold on me so tight that I could barely breathe.

Maybe he would shoot me in the arm just like what he did to my mother, maybe he would-

The door creaked open and my head jerked up towards the two countries exiting the room. Spain exited first, a furiously angry expression on his face. I paled as he walked closer and closer towards me. He was going to unleash his anger out on me, I knew it. I felt my body shake more and more as he walked closer and closer-

Only for Spain to walk right past me.

Confused, I looked over at my fellow territories, for we had all been sitting and waiting outside the room for Spain together. In fact, this was the first day I had seen any of them. I had heard word of Cuba, but this was the first time I was physically with them in the same room. Cuba looked curious, Guam looked scared, while Philippines looked like a mixture between confused and scared. What did this mean? Why didn't Spain drag us to go along with him while muttering and cursing at his defeat and his victorious enemy? Why did he just... walk off without a single word?

The door creaked again, and I turned my head to see a smug

America in a suit walk out of the room. He snickered and yelled out after Spain, "Don't forget to tell everyone about how I beat your sorry ass!"

"Fuck off!" Spain angrily yelled back, storming out of view.

America laughed again and looked at his watch. He was about to simply walk away when he jolted, spotting the four confused and scared territories in the hallway. He looked like he was questioning life itself before realization dawned on his face and he laughed at himself, "Oh, right. The territories."

He gave us a reassuring smile before walking up and kneeling down to be at our eye level. I heard Cuba scoff and, in the corner of my eye, saw him turn his head to the side. What is America trying to do? What is he going to do? America coughed, "Ouch, tough crowd. Um. You... are all mine now. As you must know, I won that war against Spain and, as per our treaty, you are all now my territories. I don't know exactly how Spain treated you, but I can say that from now on, things are going to be very different. No unusual punishments, you'll be treated like actual human beings- the whole package, y'know? Basically- What I'm trying to say is that-" Fumbling for words, America awkwardly held out his hand, "Just... If you join me, I promise that you'll finally be free. And, if you truly want to, you can join my family. I promise that I'll look after you and protect you with all I have."

Nervous, I glanced at my fellow territories. Guam looked unsure, Cuba didn't look interested at all, while Phillippines looked skeptical. I looked, unsure, at America. But at that moment, I looked into his eyes and suddenly felt reminded of something... no, someone.

He looked so sure of himself, so caring. He looked like he really would protect us with all he had, that he really would let us become a part of his family.

Family... not Spain's version of family, but rather, being loved and loving back. Always being there for each other through the worst of times and simply caring. I wanted that. I've wanted to get that back for so long.

Maybe... Maybe America isn't so bad. Maybe- just maybe- he could become the family I didn't even know I needed. And, with hope shining in my eyes, I was the first to speak up, "Yeah, I'll join you."

America's face burst into a wide grin as he offered me his hand. I took it and he gently shook my hand. "Well then," He started, "What's your name?"

"Puerto Rico."

America grinned back at me, "Why hello, Puerto Rico. It's nice to meet you."

"Could..." I paused, "Could I become a part of your family?"

He gave me a soft and understanding smile, "Of course you can. I promise I'll never abandon you, never."

I felt joy burst through my chest as tears formed in my eyes. Before I could do anything about it, I was sobbing in pure joy and relief. America looked confused and worried as he hurriedly asked, "Are you okay? Did I do something wrong?"

I shook my head, tears still flowing down my cheeks. I choked out a laugh, "No, you- You didn't do anything wrong, I just-" Another sob. I looked up at America, "I'm just so glad I'm finally away from that hell," I smiled, "Thank you...

"Thank you so much, America."

...

...

...

I mean, who would've guessed that what America said was a lie?

'I'll never abandon you.'

... It was all a lie, and I was a fool to believe it wasn't.

Ch 30 Pt 2: A Story from Me to You

February 1899

"So... how does this work?"

America turned to me, his eyes flickering between me and Guam, who was on my left. Though I'm sure Guam has gone through his own list of atrocities and pain, he didn't seem to be as eager to escape it as I was. As far as I could tell, Guam didn't trust America at all.

Either way, we were his now, and we both understood that. We would do as he says- we were trained well to never defy orders, after all. Though, not everyone was as conditioned by Spain as us, apparently. Cuba wasn't here, nor was Philippines. Word on the street was that Philippines was trying to fight for his independence against America. On one hand, I mentally scoffed at the idea. America seemed to be a great guy, why not stick around and see where this goes? But, then I remember all the pain we all went through under my bastard of a father and I find myself understanding Philippines on a level America would probably never achieve.

"Well," America started, trying to find the best words to explain it, "Essentially, we merge and you become a part of me. After we merge, you become and dwell in a part of my mind."

Guam's eyes narrowed, "What happens to our physical bodies?"

America shrugged, "They don't exactly disappear, but they don't really exist either... if that makes any sense."

"So, you don't know what happens to them?" Guam asked, an edge to his voice I didn't expect to come from him.

America frowned and said, "It's not like your bodies disappear- if we unmerge, your physical bodies appear again," America looked away, "Though- if I'm being honest- this knowledge is very new to me."

Guam was about to say something else when I interrupted him, ignoring the sour glare directed at me, "So, how do we merge anyway?"

America smiled, obviously relieved for the subject change, "The way I do it is quite simple actually- There are three steps: A physical document, a desire to merge, and we need to touch each other physically. We already have the document, so we're good to go whenever."

A smile formed on my face. I was about to do just that when Guam took hold of my arm, stopping me with a distrustful look on his face. He whispered, "You actually trust him?"

My brows furrowed, "Why shouldn't I?"

An angry look appeared on his face, "What about everything we've been through? How will we know he won't do the same things that *he* did?"

I felt sadness tug at my heart, "I don't know. But... how will we know if I don't try?" Guam was silent, and I continued, turning to him with a smile, "How about we make a promise?"

Guam looked confused, as he questioningly repeated, "A promise?"

I nodded, "From one ex-Spanish territory to another, I promise that if America ends up just like Spain, we'll fight for our independence," I smiled warmly, "together, as brothers."

Guam still looked unsure, but eventually sighed and nodded in hesitant agreement. With that affirmation, I turned back to America and held out my right hand for him to take, Guam taking my left hand. America smiled and took my hand in his own, whispering, "Thank you."

With those two words, the world around me started sparkling and wavering as if little pieces of stars were sprinkling themselves down

onto the world below. The only thing that didn't waver was Guam. A little bit too quickly for my liking, the world started sparkling away. The minute before the world disappeared, I felt consciousness slip from my grasp, and I was knocked out.

...

I opened my eyes with a groan. The sun was too bright...

Wait, the sun?

I quickly shot up and scrambled to my feet. I was in a clearing almost too green to be real. It had sparsely scattered trees, bushes, and various wildflowers that often covered large stretches of the clearing. A bit to my left was the unconscious body of Guam and, far away to my right, there was what seemed to be a quaint little cottage. But the longer I looked at the cottage, the more it wavered and twisted to become a large house, maybe even a mansion. Another look, and it was a quaint little cottage again. Starting to get a minor headache, I decided to not look at the abnormally shifting house anymore.

When the headache faded, questions started bombarding my mind. Where were we? Weren't we supposed to end up in a mental world? Is this the mental world? It must be but...

Weren't there supposed to be others? America mentioned them a couple of times. I believe he called them 'the states.' Where were they?

Trying to find answers on knowledge on my strange surroundings, I continued to scan the horizon, quickly noticing the oddities of the mental world, if it even was that. At the edges of the vast clearing, there were mountains of stagnant mist, formed almost like a wall. In some places, the mist looked to be more like patches of pure, heavily-misted darkness, while in other places, the mist was light and sparse enough to show scraps of what seemed to be continuations of the too-green clearing beyond the mist. The grass, flowers, and leaves in the trees also constantly shifted and moved as if the wind was blowing through them, but I felt wind myself.

Looking upwards, I saw that the sun was at its highest reach in the too-blue sky, which was strange considering the fact that I felt no warmth from it. There weren't any clouds either, leaving the sky clear.

I went over to Guam's unconscious body and woke him up. He groaned a little bit before I said, "C'mon, get up, we need to get moving." To where I had no idea. Our best bet at the moment was the headache house, so we might as well go there.

Guam sat up, his eyes widening at our weird surroundings. I let him scan our surroundings himself before urging him to move towards the house. He nodded, and we started walking towards the house. On the way there, however, a figure left the house in a hurry. As we got closer, I noticed that the figure, a girl with a red and white striped flag with a blue box in the top left corner, a gold symbol in that box, and white stars in a circle formation surrounding the gold symbol, was *really* mad.

Eventually, she noticed us and paused in what I could only assume was confusion. Who we were clicked into her brain, and she smiled, now walking straight for us. Once she reached us, we paused. She started speaking, "Yo͞o to͞o är Puerto Rico and Guam, rīt?"

I blinked in confusion. What? What did she just say? Whatever those words were, they definitely weren't Spanish. I turned to look confusedly at Guam. America spoke and understood Spanish, why doesn't she?

She stood there for a few moments before realization dawned on her face and she started laughing, "Ō mī gäd, Ī kəmˈplētlē fərˈgät yo͞o to͞o dōnt spēk ˈinglish!" She thought for a moment, before beckoning us to follow her to the headache house, which was currently a quaint cabin.

I shared a glance with Guam, before following her. As we got closer to the house, I heard the sounds of yelling through the door. Though it was slightly muffled, it was still very audible and I could tell that the striped girl was quickly getting mad. Once we got to the door of the house, the yelling was so loud and furious that I felt prickles of fear run down my spine. Though I couldn't understand a

word said, the fact they were yelling in the first place was reminding me of things I'd rather forget.

Reaching her wit's end, the striped girl in front of us slammed the door open, quickly interrupting the argument inside. She walked into the house and I hesitantly followed, receiving a lot of curious stares from the people inside. There were two people in the center of the room- the probable culprits of the earlier yelling- who looked furious with each other while there were at least twenty others surrounding them. Some of the bystanders looked faintly amused, some annoyed, and some weren't even paying attention, doing their own things in the corners of the vast room. Of the two in the center, one of them had a flag reminiscent of Chile's, while the other had the Union Jack in the top left corner with red, white, and navy blue horizontal stripes.

All too quickly, however, the Chile look-alike turned back to the Union Jack girl and started yelling again, "Fôr thə last tīm, ā kädij iz too smôl!" With that final word, the house around them wavered and expanded, magically becoming much larger in size. The furniture also changed, looking more classy and almost plantation-mansion-like.

That seemed to be striped girl's final straw, as she rushed up to Chile look-alike and hit him on the back of his head, a look of intense fury on her face, "KAN BŌTH ƏV YOO SHƏT ƏP?! Mī gäd, yoo too är inˈsəfrəbl! Thə sīz əv thə hous dəznt ˈmadər! ˈKämprəˌmīz ôr gō əp too yôr roomz!"

With a lot of grumbling, Union Jack and Chile look-alike huddled together, talking a little bit before Union Jack smirked and snapped her fingers. The size of the house didn't seem to change, but the furniture certainly did. It had a more cozy, beachside feel now, which is much different from the grand, plantation feel it had moments before. Chile look-alike, still partially unpleased, was about to walk away when he locked eyes with me. He raised an eyebrow, "Hooˈər thēz skrônē feləz?"

Striped girl, who has calmed down a little bit, responded with an exasperated sigh, "Thə noo ˈterəˌtôrēz."

A bystander who was messing with the radio in the far corner- his flag was mainly yellow with a red symbol in the middle- jerked his head up and spoke, "Thə noo ˈterəˌtôrēz?" He scanned the room a little bit before finally spotting Guam and me. He smiled and asked, "You guys speak Spanish, right?"

Upon hearing something recognizable, I felt whatever tension I felt moments before slip away. I sighed in relief and spoke, "Yeah, we do. We can't understand anything they're saying."

The Spanish-speaking guy chuckled, "Don't worry, you'll learn... eventually. I suppose I'm the one who has to introduce you now..." He sighed before brightening up and saying, "My name is New Mexico. The one who kind of looks like a Chile rip off is Texas, the one who looks like she's sucking up to Britain big time is Hawaii, and the girl who brought you here is named Georgia."

I cast a nervous look at all the others in the room and New Mexico chuckled, "Don't worry, I won't make you meet them all at once. There's too many of us, and I'm too lazy for that. Plus, I'm not sure they'd pay attention to you or me, anyway. We're a stupidly large, somewhat dysfunctional family."

I smiled weakly, "Maybe I can become part of that family?"

A soft smile formed on New Mexico's lips, "What are you talking about?

"You're already a part of our family."

--x--

~1949

I laid down, eyes closed, in the too-green clearing, Hawaii messing with some flowers to my right and Guam trying to learn how to write in English through the median of a book on my left. Today was honestly a very neutral day. I wasn't sad, but I wasn't happy either. It was just... okay. I mean, Florida's Crocodiles haven't broken into my room yet, which is always nice.

Getting used to this hectic house was a strain. Not only were there

Florida's crocs to worry about, but I also had to constantly make sure I wouldn't get trampled by Texas's horse and, occasionally, his Texas Longhorn. And it was especially difficult for me, being a territory and all.

Let me explain.

When I first came here, I realized that the states could change a lot of things in this world to their will and make things appear out of thin air. The clearing, the sky, the sun, the flowers, trees, fake wind, and the house? That was all their doing. The various animals scattered around the house? Once again, their doing. But, I can't do any of those things. I can't make things appear out of thin air or manipulate the world around me. Why? Because I'm a territory and they're states. It has something to do with how America's government is structured, I know that much.

It's frustrating and unfair. I can't decorate my room or do anything, really, I'm just *there*. I can watch everything, but I don't truly get a say in what's done. If Texas is trying to start a rodeo in the middle of the living room, my only option is to *get out of there*. The territories can't *do* anything, we just have to scurry away like afraid mice and hope a state will get annoyed enough to stop Texas. Because of that, It was extremely hard to have any sort of emotional connection to this place when I first came. Honestly, I've stopped trying to.

Though the states might call this place their home, I honestly can't see it as such. I'm constantly forced to speak a foreign language I had to painstakingly learn over a few years with barely any help, and speaking in a second tongue that you know you're going to eventually mess up somehow is both extremely stressful and extremely frustrating. Honestly, if New Mexico hadn't been there to help teach me English, I'd be dead meat by now. Though it's hard for me to see most of the states as siblings, I grew incredibly close to New Mexico very quickly. The times we hang out are always the best part of each day. Not only do I get to speak my maiden tongue with him, but I can also let everything out and rant for hours on end without fear of being judged.

So far, the only people I've really grown close to are Hawaii, New

Mexico, and the territories. Each for their own reasons I won't really get into right now. Beyond them, I don't really know anyone else after all these years. I know all their names, but I only know them enough for the occasional "hi" and "how are you doing."

"Puerto Rico!"

My eyes snapped open at the sound of my name and I sat up, twisting around to see New Mexico at the doorway of the house. I tilted my head and yelled back in Spanish, "¿Qué pasa? **(What's up?)**"

New Mexico pointed towards the inside of the house with his thumb, "Papá está adentro y quiere hablar contigo. **(Dad's inside and he wants to speak with you.)**"

Oh, right. Another thing I forgot to mention. America comes around occasionally to talk and hang out with us. I usually don't join in, but some states really enjoy it.

"Ok, dile que estaré allí en un momento. **(Ok, tell him I'll be there in a moment.)**" New Mexico nodded and went back inside before I hefted myself onto two feet and cracked my back. I heard Hawaii say some along the lines of "ew" and chuckled.

I headed inside. The vast main room that used to be here was currently a hallway that stretched down to the kitchen and branched off to other various rooms. Like everything else in this world, the house has been remodeled about fifty times since I got here. Quickly spotting America in a small room off to the right, I started heading there. I don't really know why America wanted to talk to me, but I really hoped it wasn't *another* artillery base.

Entering the room, I noticed that it vaguely looked like an office, with its grand desk and executive chair in the middle of the room, surrounded by various bookcases. So this was where Guam got his book from. America was in the center of the room, sitting on top of the desk and looking at a book in his hands. I knocked on the room's wooden doorway, immediately getting his attention.

He smiled at me, putting the book back onto the shelf and standing

up, "If you want, you can sit down," He gestured towards the executive chair for the desk.

I gave him a questioning look, "How long is this going to take?"

"Not that long, hopefully."

"Then I'm good. I can stand," I replied.

America glanced at me before shrugging, "Whatever you wish."

"So what do you want?" I blurted out.

America looked surprised and sputtered out, "No, no, no, no, no I don't- I don't want anything from you. I just wanted to tell you something. Jeez, where did all that positivity go from sixty years ago?"

I gave America an are-you-seriously-asking-me-this-question-right-now and bluntly responded, "Texas. Florida. I couldn't speak English at first. I could go on and on."

"Right," America stated, "I'm sorry about the last one, I kinda forgot that most of them don't speak Spanish."

I sighed, "It's fine, honestly. This is heaven compared to Spain."

America opened his mouth, probably to ask about the comment I made, before realizing that it was probably a sensitive subject and stopping himself. I pretended I didn't notice and asked, "So what do you want to tell me?"

"Right," America smiled, suddenly looking very happy and proud, "So, I realize that putting artillery bases on the San Juan forts wasn't exactly *considerate* of your opinion-" I gave him a *no duh* look and he put his hands up in the air, "-BUT, I managed to nudge a few people and push a few strings to try and make it up to you."

"Make it up to me? How?" Even though I was very confused about what he was trying to point at, I felt gratitude towards America. He was nice, much nicer than Spain. I liked that about him. He wasn't the best guy in the entire world, but he at least apologized when he

messed up, rather than kneeing me in the gut or almost shooting me.

America's ecstatic grin returned, "They're national parks now. The forts, I mean. They'll never be taken down, ever! And, if we can, we're going to try to restore them to their former glory. You know, make sure they don't suddenly collapse because they're *really old*-"

I ran up and hugged him, cutting him off. He was shocked for a few moments before hugging me back. At that moment, I was so glad he couldn't see my face because I was about to cry. I would never be able to properly describe how much those forts to me. They were my homes for hundreds of years, the places of my best moments and my worst ones. They were the forts where I made friends and said goodbye to those friends. They were the home to so many laughs, soldiers, tears, playful banter, drinking contests, crazy actions, and comradery only made through months of having to sleep in the same room and deal with each other. In my heart, those forts are still my home. And hearing America say that... It makes me so happy.

No, hearing *Dad* say that makes me so happy. He cares. Why did I let Guam's doubt seep into me before? Guam was wrong, I was wrong. We didn't need to make that promise after all. He really cares, he must care. He isn't like Spain at all. No, he's better than Spain. He's more of a dad than Spain ever will be.

Despite the fact happy tears were threatening to fall, I stuttered, "T-Thank you. Thank you s-so, so m-much, Dad."

--x--

September 2017

The terrifyingly strong winds whipped around me, threatening to pluck me off of the ground and throw me into the sky. Heavy rain pelted down on me, making it impossible to see further than a few feet ahead of you. I felt water up to my knees, though it had been there for a while. It was early in the morning, not like you could tell that with the storm raging around me. Though everything seemed quiet- maybe too quiet- I knew what was really happening. I could feel it. I could feel the way this storm

was tearing me apart. The way pain ricocheted across my entire body, reminding how much pain my people and land were going through.

If I focused hard enough, I could feel the twinge in my heart every time I felt someone die. It was too many times. It was far too many. How many were children? How many were the elderly who can't escape the deathly grip of this horrid storm?

I searched with my hands to try and grip something close to me, fearing being swept away by the water and by the storm. I could've sworn I heard a scream. I pursed my lips before feeling the pole of a street light. I quickly gripped it just as another wave went crashing through the streets.

I squinted as I tried to peer through the wall of rain before me, only to see a car being swept towards me and my pole. With a yelp of fear escaping my lips, the car was swept straight into the pole and hit my arm, causing me to yell out in pain and let go of the street light.

As expected, I fell straight into the water, disoriented and in pain. I opened my eyes, stinging in the saltwater, to try and find the surface, only to see the sickly red of my own blood staining the water. Oh, so that explains the excruciating pain in my arm.

With the murky and dirty saltwater certainly not helping, I kept going in the wrong direction of the surface of the water, though I could've sworn I've gone in every direction. I was quickly running out of air, and I needed to get out. But, I couldn't find the surface of the water no matter how hard I tried. My lungs burned, begging me for air. I knew I could only resist the burning for so long. My swimming became more rapid and vigorous. Before I knew it, I forgot to hold my breath and water entered my lungs. My lungs had been set on fire. I felt myself cough, only to no avail. I flailed about in the water, trying so desperately to find a pocket of air. I felt my throat tighten, preventing any more water from coming in.

However, I quickly realized it wouldn't be the water that would kill me. Due to the deprivation of oxygen, my movements started slowing down and I could feel myself becoming faint. After one final desperate attempt, I blacked out.

I woke up in a cold sweat and immediately felt the urge to throw

up. I stumbled out of bed and towards the trash can in my room, feeling liquids rise up from my throat and into the trash can. Tired and weak, I opened my eyes. Oh frick, that's not vomit. I could recognize that red color anywhere. I felt my grip tighten on the trash can.

What was this, the third time this week I've had nightmares about Maria? The second time I've thrown up blood? Something like that. It's been a week, but my body still feels the same as the day of the hurricane. Awful, weak, endless pain.

My people are suffering, and I can't do anything. And even though I've been begging my siblings, I haven't received any aid yet. It sucks. Hurricane Harvey- just a month earlier- was given so much aid almost immediately. What about my aid? Where is my help when I need it? Where is my people's help and aid?! They're going through so much pain, I can tell. I felt tears prick at my eyes. This is all so unfair. Why? WHY?!

What made me so different from Texas and Louisiana?

Why did Dad care about them more?!

Tears fell from my cheeks and I sharply inhaled. Is it because I'm a territory? Is it because not all of my people speak English? My grip tightened on the trash can. My people are just as human as anyone in Texas, why aren't we treated the same?! Why? WHY?!

I coughed, grimly noticing the blood that spattered into the trash can.

My people deserve better than this.

I deserve better than this.

My eyes flickered to the only personal object in my room. An old, small photo and frame on my nightstand of me and America. It was taken by New Mexico after Dad told me about the forts becoming national parks.

I looked so happy.

I clenched my hands into fists, feeling angry tears fall down my cheeks.

Maybe "Dad" isn't so caring after all.

--x--

October 2017

"Please! All I'm asking is that you send more aid!"

"I'm really sorry but-"

"Sorry?!" I yelled out. America flinched back. I didn't care that everyone was looking at us. I didn't care that I could barely stand and that I could taste blood in my own mouth. I will not stop until he hears me, "My people are dying and you're killing them with your inefficiency!"

"Puerto Rico-" America started, but I quickly interrupted him.

"Don't you *fucking* dare try to tell me you can't send a lot of aid *because that's a big fucking lie.* My people are suffering, and you're sitting here on your ass doing nothing! What am I to you?! What are my people to you?! You keep downplaying Maria as if nothing has happened, but you know what?!" I angrily gestured with my hands as I spoke, unafraid of any repercussions.

"Please, Puerto Ri-"

"No, you shut the *fuck* up for one *goddamn second* and *LISTEN TO ME!*" I barely registered the fear in America's eyes as I continued to yell, "Because, NEWS FLASH, just because Maria isn't anything compared to Katrina doesn't mean it *doesn't matter!* Because it *does!* My people have lost homes, family members, friends, access to clean water, they don't have service to call their families and make sure everyone made it out alive, and what do you do?! Your president implies that what I'm going through- what my people are going through- wasn't a real catastrophe?! And you stand there and do *nothing!* How *could* you?! HOW COULD YOU ABANDON MY PEOPLE LIKE THAT?! HOW CAN ANY HUMAN BEING INVALIDATE SOMEONE ELSE'S PAIN?! HOW CAN YOU INVALIDATE

SOMEONE'S DEATH AND THE PAIN THEIR FAMILY AND FRIENDS HAVE TO GO THROUGH NOW BECAUSE OF IT?! HOW? *HOW?!"*

America was speechless, and I foreignly touched my cheek to find it wet. I was crying.

I balled my hands into fists and choked out, "How *could* you? You're so, so cruel, America. You give me hope for a few decades that I might have a family that actually cares for me, only for you to pull the rug out from under me like this. How could you? I thought you were different from Spain, I thought you actually *cared*!" I looked straight at America, my voice cracking due to the emotional pain this was giving me, "I suppose we all know who got played here. You played me so good, I never even knew I was being used in the first place!" I found myself erupting in small giggles at the end of that sentence, but it wasn't funny. None of this is funny.

None of this is funny.

"Was this all just some sort of sick game to you, America? Does this make you happy, seeing me in so much pain?"

America's face scrunched up in obvious pain that I didn't see through my rage, tears, and pain, "No, Puerto Rico, I-"

I wiped away my tears, but they still stubbornly flowed down my cheeks, "I don't want to hear it. Whatever excuse you have for yourself won't help my people."

I turned and started walking away, only to hear America say, "I'm so sorry, Puerto Rico, I really am-"

I stopped walking, gripping my own arm as I spat out, "No, you aren't."

I felt pain shoot up my arm as my tiny nails dug into my own skin, "If you were sorry, we wouldn't even be arguing in the first place."

A tear dropped onto the floor.

"I hope you're *happy* now, after all you've done. I really, really do."

With that being said, I walked away.

And never looked back.

--x--

December 2017

I looked at the vast Atlantic Ocean before me, the wind blowing against me and whipping around me. I knew how this dream would go. The minute I turned around, I would see the unending devastation of my home. Of the only place I will ever consider my home.

But, even though I'm aware this is a dream, I have to help my people, even dream world ones. So, I turned around, only to see the dream world collide with a foreboding, pitch-black void, appearing like a wall in stark contrast with the pale sand. I felt confusion flow through me. The dream usually doesn't go like this. I hesitantly walked up to the void and pushed my hand into it, expecting a wall only for there to be none. Slowly, curiosity got the better of me and I waded into the darkness of the void.

I had been walking for a while when doubt started creeping into my mind. Was there just going to be void forever? Was this all there was? Maybe I should go back. I turned around, only to feel confused. The beach was nowhere in sight. It was gone. Instead, there was a slumped over figure a little ways away, sitting in a bored position. As I got closer, I noticed he didn't have feet. But there weren't stumps, it just looked like part of his legs were faded away, wavering away into nothingness. But there was something about him that felt familiar. I could've sworn I've seen that flag before, but where?

Despite my better judgment, I yelled out, "Hello?"

Upon hearing my voice, the familiar guy jumped, turning around to look at me. Now that I saw his full face, I knew who he was. My eyes widened. His flag was one that I'd occasionally see waving outside of many southern states' rooms, much to America's discomfort.

The southern states nicknamed him Confederacy, but I had known him as the CSA.

Though, I could've sworn his flag was different in the 1860s.

Confederacy's face scrunched up in mild confusion, "You can see me?" I hesitantly nodded, and he looked surprised. He sputtered a little bit, thinking about the right words to say before asking, "What's your name?"

"Puerto Rico," I replied, my hand going up to my neck nervously, "I guess it's nice to meet you, Confederate States of America."

Confederacy stared at my flag for a moment, confused, before realizing that flag changes exist. Upon this inner realization, he faintly smiled, "Yeah, nice to meet you, too."

--x--

September 2018

"It's been a year."

"A year since what?"

"Maria. I've ranted about that hurricane far too much at this point," I scrunched up my face in pain. I had gotten a little bit too used to the dull ache that's been dwelling in my heart since Hurricane Maria, "But... things are still the same."

Confederacy looked confused, "What are you talking about? Surely things are better now?"

I almost laughed at that, "No, it hasn't. I can tell it hasn't. People are still suffering. People are still without water, without power, without medicine, and sometimes even without food. And I can do nothing to help. I want to help them so badly, but I'm *stuck in this hell-hole!*

"And I know this isn't some sort of accident that we weren't given as much aid as Hurricane Harvey. My people know, too. America hasn't done a good job, I'm pretty sure my government hasn't done a good job either, people are afraid, people are angry, people are suffering, and people are unsatisfied. It's been rubbing off on me so, so much," I fumbled with the string on my hoodie, "I know that if I

were a state, my people would be okay. My people wouldn't be in so much pain. I know there's a bias there because America doesn't care at all. He's been *ignoring* what's happening to me for the past year. None of them actually cared. God, I was so naive."

"Is this why you've been chilling around in my nightmare hole for the past few days?" Confederacy asked, sipping on a Coca-Cola he magically made appear in his hands. Unlike me, he could actually make things appear and can affect America's mental world, but he claims it takes a lot out of him. He still doesn't have feet, though.

"Yeah, it is. I can't stand being there anymore. It reminds me of how fake our 'family' is and, honestly, how much I wish I could go back to being naive- before this all happened. Back then, I was happier. Now all I can think of is pain and grief." I sighed, feeling exhaustion wash over me. In America's mental world, we only need to sleep when we're weak due to our lack of physical bodies, but I've avoided sleeping for a few weeks now despite my mental and physical state. I *should* get sleep, but I don't want another nightmare.

"It just sucks. And it's a really big reality check. Texas and Louisiana got so much in aid a year ago while I... I didn't. My people aren't getting enough and they're suffering, but it's like no one really cares about me and my people anymore." I sighed, before sadly chuckling at myself, "I'm such an idiot for trusting them."

Confederacy sipped on his coke again, a sympathetic look on his face, "Hey, it's not your fault they're all assholes, I should know."

"I guess so," I agreed, not really paying attention to what he said, but pretending that I did, "I just... I feel so dumb and used and worthless and in pain and I wish I could've seen this coming, you know? I just... I'm so tired of this, and I hate America so much for doing basically nothing while I'm throwing up in the corner, you know? It's like I don't even exist to them."

Confederacy commented, "What a coincidence, I hate that Yankee, too. You'd think all that hatred would fade after all this time just like how my feet have, but I think I actually hate him more than back then."

"You do?" I asked, slightly surprised. Is he not tired like me? What in the world keeps him running?

"Yea, of course, I do." Confederacy spat, so much pent up anger bubbling up in his voice. The anger in his voice resonated with me in a way I couldn't understand, "He *ruined* me... He's the reason I'm fading like this. He killed me, took *my* states, he took *everything* from me!" Confederacy sighed angrily, "But honestly, rage won't keep me alive. I don't think I'll survive much longer without some form of support."

I looked at the dark woods around us in timid thought. Confederacy nicknamed it his 'nightmare corner,' though I don't understand why. At this point, Confederacy was the closest thing I had to a friend. I had stopped talking to New Mexico and Hawaii since Maria, and because of that, my loneliness has spiked while my self-worth has considerably dropped.

I honestly felt bad for Confederacy. We were both sad, angry, and alone. I understood him, and I'm pretty sure he understood me. He was a horrible person back in the physical world, but I'm pretty sure he's changed... pretty sure. I mean, why else would he listen to me cry and rant and just generally be lazy if he didn't care in some way? Confederacy listened to me and made me feel like my stupid opinion mattered. I didn't want to lose the only thing keeping me sane at this point. I scrunched up my face and, despite the uneasy feeling in my gut, hesitantly said, "I mean... I could support you and make it so that you don't die."

Confederacy almost immediately became interested and stared at me intently. I messed with my hoodie's strings again before forcing myself to look confident, "I could support you, but I want something in return. Three things, to be exact."

Confederacy leaned back onto the tree behind him, his demeanor completely different from before and his Coke sparkling away into the trees, "Name your price."

"One, you're going to help me become independent. Two, you're going to help me give aid to every single citizen of mine who suffered from Hurricane Maria and finally pay them back for their

suffering. Three," I hesitated, before saying the final demand, "Three, you're going to help me find a family that really, truly cares."

Confederacy smirked, "Done, done, and done. You have a deal on your hands, partner."

I blinked, feeling hope swell through me for the first time in a year.

Maybe everything will end up okay.

Maybe my people and I will finally be free from this pain.

...

Later that Day...

"So you're telling me that you want me to *reconnect* to my siblings?!" I yelled out, my voice echoing against the trees.

Confederacy nodded, "It doesn't have to be genuine, but we want to be on the down-low if possible. Become 'friends' with them so that they don't suspect you when we eventually start our plan."

I gave Confederacy a sour look and he continued, "You don't have to talk with America at all, just the states and territories. And DC, of course."

I growled, "*Fine.*"

After a few more hours of talking and planning, I was finally forced to tiredly trudge back to my "home." I walked through the black mist of where Confederacy hung out until I reached the meadow, its eternal sun shining on the grass down below. I gritted my teeth before walking up to the house and heading inside. The door currently opened up into a hallway, with the living room to the left, the kitchen up ahead, and a doorway adjoining to two on the other side of the stairs, which were near the back of the hallway. I heard the chaos in the living room and immediately decided that I could wait a day. Whatever was happening in there, I didn't want to know.

I uneasily trudged up the stairs, feeling out of place and unwanted. I kept on going until I reached my room, a dull oasis amongst a barrage of color and accentuations. Vir's (US Virgin Island's) bedroom was also quite bare, though, unlike me, he had asked Hawaii to make him his own flag. It was eventually placed proudly on a small peg on his doorway.

I turned to my door, pushing it open and wincing when it made a loud creak. I headed inside, glancing around my barren room. I sighed, heading up to my bed. Maybe I should finally get some shut-eye.

My eyes drifted to my nightstand and I looked at its solitary picture. I felt my heart break. Those times were simpler, but fake. I went up to the nightstand and carefully picked up the picture frame with both hands, sorrowfully looking at the picture of me and America smiling together. Before I could stop it, tears flowed down my cheeks.

My body shook with sobs and my tears pattered onto the frame's glass covering. My grip tightened on the poor frame. Why was I crying? Isn't it better to know the truth? Isn't it worse to live in a stupid lie?

I glanced over at my trash can, an idea forming in my mind. I hurriedly wiped away my stupid tears, set down the picture, took out the garbage bag that was in the trash can, put in on the floor, and dashed downstairs to the kitchen. With my hands shaking, I searched through almost every drawer before finding it: a matchbox.

I snatched the matchbox, going back up to my room. Putting the matchbox on my nightstand, I used two hands to take the picture out of its frame. The longer I stared at the picture, the more sour and angry I became, all of the feelings bottled up in the past year pouring out of me like a river. Not caring about any consequences, I proceeded to grab the frame and angrily throw it against the wall, the glass covering shattering into tiny little pieces and landing all across the floor.

But I wasn't done. My eyes flicked over to the picture and I grabbed

a match, lighting it. After lighting the match, I picked up the picture with the hand that wasn't carrying the match. With my movements much more confident and aggressive than before, I strode over to the trash can.

With eyes glinting in the light of the fire, I brought the match and the picture together, watching the picture light on fire. With the picture on fire, I dropped it in the now empty metal trash can, watching it fall down into the trash can and burn into a crisp. I shook out the flame still on the match and walked away.

*I was **done** living a lie.*

And, after this, I'll never live one again. You'll see, America, you'll see. I'm not your fake 'son' anymore. I'm going to build myself a future, and I'll do whatever it takes to get it.

Whatever it takes.

~~~~

Oh dang, 7000 words
~~~~

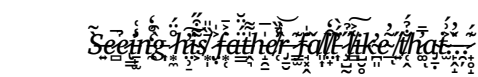
Ch 31: Red and Blue Lights \\ The Hospital

Everything was a blur of red and blue lights.

One moment, everything was normal; but in the next, tears were forming in America's eyes and he had collapsed onto the floor. Russia could do nothing but scream out America's name and pull America in his lap, desperately crying and shouting for him to *stay with him*. Russia was terrified then, but now he just felt numb and cold.

I suppose seeing paramedics pulling the only person you've ever loved who isn't family onto an ambulance after you saw him fall and *go limp in your very arms* can do that to you.

Seeing America fall like that...



...

...Russia needed a drink.

But he couldn't. America came first.

Russia felt a hand patting his back sympathetically and turned to see Japan, her cat ears flat against her head. Russia had never seen her look so down. She seemed to struggle with words before quietly saying, "I'm so sorry, Russia... Nobody saw this coming until... he..."

Russia saw tears start to form in her eyes before he looked back at the ambulance, his heart plummeting.

"Nobody saw this coming, but I did," He muttered, guilt forming a hole in his chest. This was all his fault... If only he had told someone- anyone- about America's cracks, none of this would've

happened...

Russia, like a ghost disconnected from the world around it, watched as the back doors of the ambulance closed and a paramedic went to the driver's seat, driving away towards the hospital as the ambulance's sirens blared and echoed around in Russia's ears.

Suddenly jumping out of his shocked state, Russia ran up to one of the drivers UN had commissioned and yelled at the driver to follow the ambulance to the hospital. The human driver hurriedly nodded in fear of the Russian before him and started following the ambulance the best he could. Eventually, the hospital turned left straight into a hospital. However, the driver couldn't enter the hospital that way, so Russia instead ordered him to go to the front of the hospital.

Upon reaching the front, Russia ran inside the hospital, scaring the lady at the front desk. After Russia practically shouted at the poor lady asking where America was, she quickly searched up America on her computer and, after reading whatever it said and casting a quick look at Russia's flag, stammered out, "I'm s-sorry, but only f-family is allowed to see him ri-right now."

To Russia's luck, however, Australia and New Zealand rushed inside, asking the front lady the same question Russia did just moments before. The lady looked at their flags, then at her computer screen, and, after a frustrated look at Russia, who was still very much in earshot, told the two America's room number, *A327*.

Just as they started rushing over to the elevators, Russia stopped them. Australia gave Russia a pissed look before shoving past him towards the elevators. New Zealand stayed where she was, obviously hesitating. Russia took his chance, begging, "Please, let me come with you. I need to make sure he's ok."

Maybe it was the desperate look in Russia's eyes, maybe it was the vague memories of their night out in the city earlier in the week, or maybe it was a vague combination of the two that led New Zealand to purse her lips and nod, wiping away a few stray tears, "Just, please don't be an asshole..." With those few words and a

convincing nod from Russia, New Zealand started heading towards Australia, Russia following her.

Together, they went into the elevator, Australia tapping his foot impatiently and New Zealand clenching and unclenching her skirt in a mixture of nervousness and fear. After a half a minute, though it felt like a lifetime, they reached the third floor, and Australia immediately shot out of the elevator towards America's room, Russia and New Zealand in tow.

When they reached the room, Australia slammed the door open, scaring France, UK, Canada, and an old-looking doctor inside. Australia immediately asked, "What happened?!"

New Zealand joined in, "How is he?!"

Russia stayed silent, but he couldn't help but notice an unconscious America in the hospital bed situated near the window. He felt his heart squeeze at the sight. It felt so much worse seeing him in that hospital bed.

The doctor nervously looked at Australia and New Zealand before looking at his clipboard and releasing a shaky sigh. He then looked up at the entire group, his eyes looking at each of them in turn. Russia noticed with slight discomfort that the doctor's eyes lingered on him a few seconds longer than they should've.

"Well," The doctor started, "I'm going to admit that I'm not entirely sure what the cause is, but I do know one thing from my years of experience: he's falling apart." The doctor's eyes landed on Russia once more, now showing a small glint of accusation, "In fact, his current case is scarily similar to USSR's case."

Russia felt an angry growl start to swell in his throat, but he pushed it down, remembering New Zealand's earlier warning.

France choked out a sob, her hands covering her mouth. UK, looking conflicted and in disbelief, simply held his crying wife from the side. Russia saw tears threatening to flow down Canada's cheeks and New Zealand was full-on crying already. Australia simply looked mad at the world, his eyes burning with shock and rage.

Russia still felt numb, like none of this was really happening to him. Finding his voice, Russia asked, "How much longer does he have?"

Without sparing Russia so much as a glance, the doctor sympathetically looked at America's family, "I'm sorry, but I honestly don't think he'll last the week... I'm so sorry."

Russia felt tears unexpectedly hit him. That soon? All they have is a few measly days left? A few days, and then he's gone forever? Russia felt his throat subconsciously constrict. What will Russia do without America in his life?

The doctor, giving them all space to react to what he just said, left the room with some soft condolences. UK, shocked and almost to the point of tears, gently led his sobbing wife out of the room, trying to comfort France. Despite him being the one to comfort France, however, he was crumbling apart inside. Even though he doesn't show it nearly as much as he should, he cares about all of his children- yes, *all* of his children, even if they aren't France's- more than he cares about himself. Hearing that America will die by the end of the week gave UK a pain in his heart no father should ever have to feel: the pain of knowing he'll have to see his son die right in front of him.

Kiwi simply shook her head and stumbled backwards, almost hitting the wall. With a small sob, she ran out of the room, unable to handle everything she was feeling. Australia, pushing his anger aside, ran after her to comfort her and to try and stop her from doing anything stupid that might end up hurting her.

Russia watched as Canada, the only other person left in the room at this point, slowly sat on the side of America's bed, his hands shaking. Russia heard him sob and ask, "Why didn't you tell anyone, Ame? We could've done something before... before..."

Another sob escaped Canada's lips and Canada held his head in his hands, his soft sobs filling up the room.

Feeling various waves of sorrow and numbness crashing into him, Russia sat down on a nearby chair and closed his eyes, the wrenching feeling that he was to blame for all of this taking up

residence in his heart.

If Russia had told someone- anyone- about America's cracks, things would be different. America would still be smiling and talking to him after meetings about random, stupid things.

...America wouldn't be lying limp in a hospital bed, dying. Sure, if Russia had told someone, America would've hated him for it, but at least he wouldn't die. Feeling fresh, stubborn tears rush down his cheeks, Russia quickly wiped them away, opening his eyes to see...

Russia's nose scrunched in confusion at the strange, unexplainable sight before him.

"Что за хрень- **(What the fuck-)**"

Another Animation!

[image]

OK SO

@Zum12346 made another animation and jksjfhjdfskjfhueshd

I can't tell you how much I appreciate it and love it! Honestly, I wouldn't even have enough motivation to animate something for my own series, so ily, no homo (I get the feeling I've said this before, hmmm)

So, uh, I'm giving you love and you can't stop me!

❤❤❤❤❤❤❤❤❤❤❤❤❤❤❤❤❤❤❤❤❤❤

(the next chapter will be out in a sec)

Ch 32: When everything goes black \\ (The) Holy Maple Syrup

"Что за хрень? **(What the fuck?)**"

In front of Russia, haphazardly plopped on top of America, were the unconscious bodies of two short countryhumans. One had a union jack with blue, red, and white stripes, while the other had a golden anchor, a blue banner under that anchor, and thirteen golden stars that surrounded both the anchor and the banner

Canada, not understanding what Russia said but knowledgeable enough to know it was probably a swear word, turned around to face Russia, "Could you please not swea-" But then he caught sight of the two unconscious countries laid on top of America (or whatever they were, because Russia couldn't tell at this point) and blurted out, "Holy Maple Syrup."

Russia was about to say something when Canada held up one finger to shush Russia. Russia would have objected, if not for the look of confusion and fear in Canada's eyes. Canada's brows furrowed as he took a good look at the red, white and blue one. In confusion, he said, "But I thought America annexed-" Canada's eyes widened in realization, "Oh fuck."

In any normal situation, Russia would've been offended at the hypocrisy of this all, but in this moment, all he felt was dread. He didn't know what was going on or who these people were, and he needed to know what this meant. Russia got up from his seat, "Oh fuck what? What's going on? Who are they?"

Canada simply stared at the two unconscious countryhumans, all sorts of emotions shown in his expression. Canada froze in place for a few moments before quickly getting up and speed-walking towards the door, "We need to get those two a doctor, *now*."

"What do you mean?" Russia questioned, following Canada. He didn't know what was going on, and he didn't like that *at all*. Russia raised his voice, needing answers, "Who are those people?!"

Canada paused, looking back at Russia for a split second. It gave Russia enough time to see that Canada was crying. But, strangely enough, they didn't seem like sad tears, "Those are America's states, and if they're here, this situation is so much worse than what we thought."

He clutched his shirt with his right hand, a smile showing up in his face, "But, it also means that America may not die."

--x--

Russia huffed as he plopped down onto the small couch in America's room. He was tired to say the least. He and Canada had been stuck with doctors for the past few hours, discussing America's and the state's conditions. The doctor's tests and whatnot had ended up dragging on into the late hours of the night. Canada had hesitantly gone back to his own apartment on the agreement that Russia would stay overnight with America and the states. It's not like Russia would've left America's side anyway.

The doctors identified the two as states, one of them named Hawaii and the other named Rhode Island. According to Canada, Rhode Island is genetically related to America while Hawaii was adopted in the late 19th century. Apparently, there are also about 53 others.

53 others.

Even though Russia was a little bit taken aback by the amount, it didn't make Russia love America any less. He's still the same person, with or without 55 kids. Russia rubbed his temple. They must be a handful.

A really big handful.

Anyway, back to Rhode Island and Hawaii.

The doctors claimed that they were in a "vegetative state," as in, they reported that it was like their consciousness had disappeared.

Though they breathed and occasionally blinked, the doctors stated that there was no sense of awareness or conscious activity. Not only that, but they claimed it was likely for the two to degrade into brain death. Canada looked terrified at the prospect, which was even more concerning for a particular Russian who still wasn't 100% sure of what was happening.

When Russia asked Canada about it when he was about to leave, Canada just said he'd clarify some things with his dad and tell Russia tomorrow in private. Canada looked like he was about to say something more, before he lightly shook his head, waved Russia goodbye, and left.

Leaning back into the couch, Russia sighed, looked at America. America was dying, sure, but he had a chance. They'll find a way out of this somehow, Russia knows that they will. They had to. They just had to. Russia reached for America's cracked glasses- they must have cracked when he collapsed after the meeting- and slipped them off his face. It's not like the glasses will make a difference now that everyone's seen his cracks.

Black eyes and cracks... the basic signs of instability. Russia frowned. If only America hadn't hid it for so long, then they could've done something sooner. Plus, Russia didn't think... He always thought that America was strong enough to not have any threat of collapse. Instability and collapse are two different things, after all. Russia's frown deepened. He had thought the same about his father, hadn't he? Russia felt his throat close up and he shifted so he was laying down on the couch rather than sitting on it. USSR and America aren't the same. Russia's hands balled into fists. America *will* survive this.

Russia knows he can.

--x--

America woke up with a loud groan. Pain ricocheted across his body and he no longer felt his glasses on his face, but other than that, he was relatively ok. A little disoriented, America slowly started sitting up, only to hear someone else scramble towards him and, with their hands, gently lead him back to his earlier position.

America squinted his eyes at the red, white, and blue flag, "Russia?"

"You have to rest, Ame."

America scoffed, "No, I-" Memories of what happened yesterday suddenly hit America like a train. America gripped his sheets and quickly sat back up, "R-Rhode Island and Hawaii, I-"

Russia cut him off, trying to get America to lay the frick down as quickly as possible, "They're here, in the hospital." As it turns out, Russia's comment did the direct opposite of what he wanted.

America's heart dropped as he only sat up straighter, "W-what? They're... They're here? How?" America felt fear jolt down his spine and, despite the horrid pain stretching across every cell in his body, he quickly scrambled to get off of his bed, much to Russia's dismay.

"America, what are you-"

"I'm going to see my kids," America said, conviction in his voice.

Russia growled, blocking America's way, "No, you aren't. You need to rest before you hurt yourself even more."

Glaring at Russia, shoving past him, and heading towards the door, America firmly stated, "My kids come first."

Seeing no other option, Russia gripped America's arm to stop him from going any further, "I'm sorry, America, but not this time. This time, you need to think of yourself first."

America felt anger flare up in him, ripping his arm out of Russia's grip and turning around to face him, "That means I can't see my kids?!"

Russia's face contorted in pain, "That's not what I-" But he cut himself off, trying to push down the anger and pain threatening to take control. Taking back control of his emotions, he gently put his hand on America's cheek, tracing one of the new cracks that had formed there seemingly overnight with his thumb.

Seeing Russia's pained expression and confused by the sudden

physical contact (slightly flustered by it too but we aren't gonna talk about that), America became concerned and paused. Russia took the small window of time to softly whisper, his voice quivering as he stared into America's pitch-black eyes, "You're *dying,* America."

Confusion showed itself plainly on America's face, "I'm... dying?" Russia grimaced and nodded. America looked down at the floor for a moment before his breath caught in his throat, worry-filled his eyes, and, without explanation, he scrambled out of the room.

"America!" Russia called out, chasing the American.

"Where are they?!" America yelled out, stopping in the middle of the hallway as he scanned the rooms and read their respective numbers.

"What?"

"Rhode Island and Hawaii, where are they?!" America repeated himself, trying his best to ignore the pain erupting throughout his entire body. With or without the pain, he was more concerned about his kids. Were they okay? If he was dying then surely they weren't- America had felt their pain last night and saw scraps of what happened, but please, universe, please tell him they aren't-

...Aren't dying like him.

He needed to see them. He needed to make sure they were okay.

"Please, America," Russia begged, trying to stop America.

America paused and turned his head to look Russia dead in the eyes, concern all too evident in his expression, "I won't stop until I see them and know their conditions. You want me to rest, sure, but I'll only do that after I see them. Please, tell me where they are." America felt tears prick his eyes and his voice started cracking from worry and fear, "Please, I need to see my kids."

Feeling his conviction crumble, Russia hesitantly replied, "They're both in A278. I'll lead the way only if you promise to rest right after I bring you there." America immediately nodded and Russia sighed, waving America over to the nearest elevators.

--x--

The minute the room was in sight, America sprinted straight for it, Russia quickly jolting into action to make sure America didn't accidentally hurt himself... somehow. America slammed the door open, scaring the two unsuspecting doctors and... Canada? Canada looked confused before quickly becoming worried, just like Russia had been before, "Ame? You should be resting in your room-"

However, America didn't seem to be paying attention to his brother as he immediately walked up to the side of Rhode Island's bed, seemingly in a daze. Sitting down on the side of her bed, he hesitantly caressed her cheek with the back of his hand as if in disbelief that she was in this condition. Seeing no physical response coming from her, he winced. With a small, sorrowful frown, America kissed Rhode Island's forehead as if to bade someone goodnight. Sitting back into a normal position, his hand shook and he dropped it down to his side, a soft sob escaping his lips, "I'm so sorry, Rhi. I wasn't there when you needed me, even though I'm supposed to protect you, both of you. I could do *nothing* to help you, even though I felt your pain. I didn't even- I never even saw this coming," He let out a dry, pitiful, and humorless laugh, "I've failed as your dad, haven't I?"

Russia felt his heart twist at those words, "Meri..."

But America didn't seem to hear Russia as he stood up and walked towards Hawaii's bed. Once he got close enough, he grabbed a small flower from the nearby vase and, opening up Hawaii's clenched hands, gently put the flower in her hands for her to hold. She always did love flowers, making them into flower crowns and flower bracelets whenever she could. She and Ukraine probably would've been amazing flower buddies. This time, America looked like he melted into a sitting position on the side of Hawaii's bed. He opened his mouth, but no words came out. After a few moments of silence, he clenched his fists and tried to speak again, "H-Hawaii, I'm so sorry. When I took you in, I promised you that I would protect you... I broke that promise once during Pearl Harbor and now..." He trailed off, tears pricking his eyes. He gently wiped them away and Russia noticed how America looked like he was centimeters away from breaking down completely. America's voice

cracked and quivered as he continued to speak, "I'm so sorry. I never did that flower braiding session with you, huh? I should be hearing you laugh and talk right about now... not- not *this*. Never this." America slowly started shaking his head and he let out a loud sob, finally letting tears stream down his face. In a mixture of sorrow and pain, America buried his face into his hands, crying into them.

Russia, feeling like his heart was being torn out, went up to America and sat down next to him; and, without hesitation, Russia pulled America into a hug. Though surprised, America quickly returned it and tried to cease his stubborn crying, only to fail miserably, crying and sniffling into Russia's shoulder. After a few moments, however, he finally managed to get a hold of himself and he stopped crying.

Wiping away the last of his tears, America stopped hugging Russia and stood up, looking at the doctors still awkwardly in the room. America, his eyes now a little bit red and puffy, looked straight at the female doctor and asked as if nothing had happened, "What's their conditions?"

The female doctor cast a glance at the clipboard firmly in her hand, "They're both in a vegetative state, probably persistent. As in, only their brain stems are responding. They can still breathe and occasionally will blink, but they aren't conscious or aware of anything anymore," The doctor's eyes filled with sympathy, "I'm sorry, but... there's not a very big chance of them gaining awareness again. At this point, I fear there's around a 70 percent chance they may worsen and become brain dead."

America stiffened and slowly nodded, saying quietly, "Thank you, doctor."

With one last sympathetic and well-meaning look, she nodded, leaving the room with her companion. America looked distantly at Russia before saying, "Are we going to my room now?"

With a small, unsure frown, Russia nodded, putting his hand on America's shoulder to try to comfort him. As far as Russia could tell, it didn't help much.

--x--

https://youtu.be/PCkVw5zNFZ8

Once they finally reached and entered America's hospital room, America suddenly groaned in pain, shaking his head and stumbling into the side of his hospital bed. Russia quickly became concerned, rushing to his side, "Meri? Are you okay?"

America grunted and nodded, putting on a brave face, "I'm fine, it's just a migraine or... something. It's okay, I've been through worse.

Russia's brows furrowed, "America, you're not fine, we both know that. If you're in pain, we have to get someone, this could be a really big proble-"

"I'm fine," America insisted with a weary smile, interrupting the worried Russian, "Just..." His smile dimmed and faded away, "Just tired," He lied.

"America..." Russia helplessly said, knowing that America was hiding something from him, "Why are you pushing me away all of a sudden? Please, tell me the truth. I can help."

America clenched his fists so hard his knuckles went white, "Russia, y-you don't- I- I can't- I can't drag you into my mess anymore, it's too dangerous." Tears threatened his eyes again, "You saw what happened to Rhode Island and Hawaii and I- I can't lose someone that important to me again. I- I can't afford to lose you." America whispered. What if CPR attacked Russia? What if CPR killed Russia right before America's eyes? America felt his heart freeze up at the thought. If that happened, America would never be able to forgive himself.

Russia gave America a surprised look but before firmly responding, "You're aren't going to lose me, I promise."

America gave him an unsure and fearful look before he turned and fell into Russia's arms, hugging him, "Russia, you don't understand. That isn't it- I- Ever since I woke up, I've felt as though my cells are repeatedly being torn apart and then haphazardly stitched back

together over and over and over again. I don't know how much longer I'll last. I'm splitting apart, I can feel it. Like you said, I'm dying. What if he hurts you like how he's hurting me? What if I die and hurt you in that way? I can't let you get hurt because of me..."

Russia only gripped America protectively, lightly assuring America that he'll be fine. But pain leads to paranoia and insecurities and, currently, America has too much of that going around. But it was more than that. America just had a feeling, like a miniature alarm going off in his head, and it screamed that something really bad was about to happen to him any second now.

If that was his fate, he had to say *it* now. America felt his throat close up on him. Oh, come on! He can say it, he has to say it.

He had wanted to say it differently, preferably not like this. He hated himself for even thinking about saying it here, but also he would hate himself anyway if it stayed unsaid. And, honestly, at this point, if Russia isn't the one who ends up hurt, America will be the one who ends up dead. In his original dreams of how and where *it* would be said, he would've said it at night, with stars softly but patiently sparkling in the sky and a full moon covering the world in an eerie, beautiful white light.

I'm not sure if you know, but America's always loved the night.

But dreams exist to be crushed, right? It was morning right now, not night. There were no stars, no full moon, just tears.

America opened his mouth once again, hugging Russia tighter, "I love you, Russia. I love you so, so much. And that's why I can't involve you in this. If you get hurt because of me like my kids did..." America let out a soft sob, "I would never forgive myself. I can't hurt you. I don't want to hurt you, ever. I don't know if you feel the same, but I do know that the way things are going, I'm going to hurt you, whether it's like how I hurt my states or if it's by me-" America paused for a moment, choking up on his words, "-by me dying and leaving you behind to cry. I know I don't have much time left... but you?" America let a small, sorrowful laugh, "You have possibly hundreds of years ahead of you, and when I die, I don't want to hold you down," America, separating from their hug

to see a crying Russia, gently wiped away Russia's tears and gave him a fake smile, "So please, let me live in the lie that I can't hurt you for a few seconds more."

"America..." Russia desperately tried to find the right words, only to pull America back into a hug, gripping him as if holding him will prevent him from dying.

Fate is cruel. That is a fact. Or, rather, the evil forces controlling the strings are awfully cruel, the insensitive pricks that they are. They steal and snitch, whisking potentially good moments... and lives... with their thieving, bloody hands.

One of them grinned and let out a loud, malicious laugh while the other, his arms crossed, watched from the sidelines of their nightmarish section of America's mindscape. The grinning, malicious one raised his hand and maniacally asked his partner, "Are you ready?" The partner looked to the side before he hesitantly nodded.

And, just like Thanos, the malicious one snapped his fingers, letting out loud, demented laughter that would disturb any soul.

But all America heard was the snap. America's eyes widened as complete and utter pain split his body into two... no, three... no, more than fifty pieces all at once. Feeling every sense overwhelmed by the gruesome and horrid pain now flooding his body, America let out a blood-curdling scream that would terrify even the most steadfast of souls. And, just like that, before America even had time to fully comprehend what was happening to him, everything he knew was gone, twisted into an ever-present black.

...

... As easy as turning off a light switch, is it not?

Ch 33: Those spiteful red eyes \ The "emergency plan"

In what was once America's mindscape, one lone figure stood, knife in hand. Gazing around the void, he waited. But he was waiting for far too long. He heard a whisper in his ear. Actually, a series of growls would be more accurate. *It* yearned. The figure's eyes narrowed to slits as he gradually understood *its* call and *its* frustration, feeling the same anger and frustration building up inside himself.

He wasn't here.

The lone figure's eye twitched and, baring his teeth in an ugly scowl, yelled out, "THAT FUCKING BASTARD!"

--x--

Hearing America's blood-curdling scream, pure horror and concern flooded Russia as he quickly separated from their hug to see what was happening. By the time he did that, however, America fell limp and Russia felt his heart drop, quickly recognizing what was happening. Quickly setting America down so that he could help, Russia started yelling for help and quickly looked around at the floor to make sure there was nothing dangerous, getting ready to perform CPR. Just as he was about to go through the steps, however, Russia was trampled over by someone, being pushed back towards the wall. Where there had been no one other than America a few seconds earlier, there were now about fifty people. Their heights varied drastically, but they were all much shorter than Russia, generally being around the height of most European countries, with only one exception.

But what scared Russia the most was that he couldn't see America's body anymore. But, who were these people? Realization dawned on Russia. America was a union, right? Then that must mean that these people made up his union. Russia was pretty sure Canada called

them states. Seeing a familiar blue box among the crowd, Russia shoved through the states, reaching America, who was unconscious on the floor, a few nearby states freaking out, unsure of what to do. Now that he had gotten close enough to properly see America, Russia felt his heart drop further.

America didn't have any stars on his flag

...And he wasn't breathing.

Hearing the door slam open, Russia hurriedly turned to see a terrified Canadian. Russia growled out in a mixture of fear and pain, "Get a doctor, America isn't breathing!" His eyes widening in fear, Canada quickly nodded and ran out to get a doctor.

Russia, putting his left hand over his right hand, began to start compressions. The states around him watched in fear and concern, not knowing how to help. Suddenly, a state let out a loud yelp as a certain island shoved past them, barreling into Russia and successfully knocking him down.

Russia angrily looked up to see what seemed to be a frustrated yet determined inverted Cuba. Several nearby states quickly leaped into action, collectively dragging the island away and pinning him to the ground while yelling, shouting, and bickering incoherently. The island territory struggled for a bit before realizing it was no use, yelling out, "You're all stupid if you think this is it!"

A frustrated expression on his face, Russia quickly turned to go back to giving America CPR, hearing the door open as Canada and a human doctor entered the room. But, to Russia's surprise and confusion, America wasn't on the floor anymore.

In fact, America was actually standing up, cracking his neck and knuckles with his eyes closed. Russia, though surprised and insanely confused, let out a breath of relief, standing up himself. Still, an unexplainable worry pricked at the back of his mind as he said, "America, are you okay?!"

One of the states happily remarked, "Look, his cracks are gone!"

Russia smiled and looked back at America, "I suppose you really are o..." But his words dried up. No... no, no, no, something about this wasn't right. Russia wasn't sure why, but he had this intense feeling...

That something was wrong.

America's expression twisted into a grin and Russia's heart dropped.

This isn't America.

Russia furrowed his brows and stood up straighter, feeling tension and unease prick at his mind like how a cactus would prick your finger, "You aren't America, are you?"

"America's" grin grew wider at the comment and he opened his eyes, revealing pitch-black eyes with red pupils that seemed to glow faintly. He smirked, the colors of his flag shifting and swirling before settling on a red background, a blue "x" with a white outline on top of that background, and thirteen white stars on the "x."

He spoke, his voice low, like something you would hear in your worst nightmares, "You've never been more right, Russia."

Many states froze upon seeing him while many others bristled, one of the southern states shouting out, "Get rid of those stars, bitch! We don't work with you *anymore*!"

His gaze raked over all the people surrounding him, taking a close look around him before settling on the state who shouted that out, Tennessee. His eyes started glowing an even brighter red as he started walking towards Tennessee threateningly, "We'll see about that, hm?"

Russia, quickly realizing he should probably protect America's kids, growled and punched the nameless guy right in the jaw, knocking him down to the ground. He had to protect the states. If he can just get them to merge, then America will have come back! He can't risk any of them being hurt. His heart was barely staying together as it was, and losing America forever... that would shatter it, "Who are you and what have you done to America?!"

"My name is the Confederate States of America, but you can call me 'boyfriend killer.'" Confederate smirked, gingerly touching his punched jaw before standing back up. His smirk became smug in nature, "Oh, wait, no, that's what I *would've* been called if I had given you the time to respond to America's 'confession.' Oops, sorry about that."

Russia felt anger flood him. This fucking bitch. Blinded by rage and anger, Russia went in for another punch, this time aiming for Confederate's throat.

Confederacy, however, noticing how much at a disadvantage he was, raked his gaze across everyone in the room, looking for an escape. He couldn't beat a world power without all of the states.

... Oh shit, the states!

He has America's body! So that means... Confederate grinned. That means he can just force the states and territories to unite with him! As long as they touch physically, of course.

Man, this'll be like stealing candy from a baby.

Quickly dodging Russia's punch, Confederacy ran around him, straight towards the largest group of states. DC, who was near that cluster of states, seemed to be following Confederate's train of thought, however, because his eyes widened and he hastily yelled out, "Run! He has America's body! He can force you to join him!"

Confederate scoffed. Of course. There goes his element of surprise. The cluster of states, looking partially torn between staying and running, chose to scatter, revealing a now freed Puerto Rico. Confederate mentally shrugged, Puerto Rico will have to do, I guess.

Plucking Puerto Rico up from the ground by the collar of his shirt, Confederate ran to the window, sparing a glance behind him to see an enraged Russian chasing him. Feeling whatever fragments of his demented heart clench in fear, Confederate jumped out of the window, shattering the glass, landing successfully on the pavement, and terrifying the nearby pedestrians.

Scoffing at all the terrified "Yankees" around him, he ducked into an alley, making sure to take the most confusing route through them as he could.

--x--

Russia was about to follow Confederacy out of the window when he felt someone yank on his sleeve. He turned to see a state who was slightly taller than Greece, his flag blue with an intricate center design. The state remarked, "The city's alleyways aren't a place for a foreigner like you to track someone down in. You won't find him even if you try, it's a waste of time."

Russia scoffed, shaking off the state's grip, "How would you know?"

The state looked at him, confused, before saying, "This is my land and my city, of course I'd know more about it than you, idiot," The state walked off after saying that, visibly pissed. Then, someone whose height was around Liechtenstein's walked up, Canada following closely behind, at a loss for words. Canada looked around, able to recognize some of the states, but not most of them. He vaguely recognized California and Texas while he vividly recognized the original thirteen.

The new, short fella whose flag was white with two red stripes and three red stars spoke, "Hi, Russia. I'm DC, District of Columbia, and I run this show with the help of the original thirteen, Cali, and Texas."

Russia narrowed his eyes at DC, "Is this the part where you explain everything that just happened to me to further the plot of the story?"

"What?" DC questioned, confusion flickering over his face.

"What?" Russia responded, quickly becoming confused as well.

DC blinked for a few seconds before shaking his head slightly and saying, "We are all of America's states and territories, and I'm America's capital. If the states look at you weirdly or call you 'commie' behind your back, ignore them. They don't- can't, if I'm

being more accurate- keep up with what happens in America's personal life."

Russia raised an eyebrow before sighing and rubbing his temple, "What even happened back there? Why did all you fall apart like that? And..." Russia trailed off, unable to put his desperate thoughts into words.

DC frowned, but a taller state who looked like Chile- and had about the same height as Chile- answered for him with an enraged and frustrated look, "If you wanna know, commie-"

DC clicked his tongue and muttered, "There it is."

Texas simply gave him the same frustrated look he gave Russia, continuing with accentuated diction, "We were forced apart by that shit-eating *ass*, Confederate."

"Rather painfully, too," Michigan shuddered.

DC winced, as did many of the other states. None of them could put into words how painful that split was. It wasn't natural- they didn't want to be separated. It felt like they were being ripped apart while simultaneously being set on fire. If that's how bad it was for them, it must've been so much worse for America.

Russia frowned, "What about America? Can you reform?"

DC cast an unsure look at the states and territories and commented, "I'm... not sure. We're missing America's body, Puerto Rico, Rhode Island, and Hawaii."

A determined look settled on Russia's face, "We have Rhode Island and Hawaii downstairs."

Many murmured in surprise and relief at that. If you looked hard enough, you could see North Carolina silently start to cry in relief as South Carolina pat his back consolingly. However, DC vehemently shook his head, "No! They aren't conscious or aware of anything right now! Forcing them to unite with us could overwhelm what's left of their brains and kill them! No way!"

Canada cast a surprised look at DC, "Wait- how do you know that? I thought America said that you guys can't see what America's doing, just feel the state of the country and check up on your own states."

"Well," Georgia answered, placing her hand on her chest, "*We* can't see what America's doing in the real world, but DC can. Since he's a federal district and is *technically* more a part of America than we are, he can understand and connect with America on another level."

"Because of that, he can look in on what America's doing and let us look in on what he's doing, though it tires him out," Minnesota joined in.

"We usually don't watch with him, though, because we're too busy doing our own thing," said Nebraska.

"And by that, they mean that the states are causing pure chaos and Texas is probably starting another rodeo and releasing Longhorns into the house," U.S. Virgin Islands grumbled.

"Hey! That was uncalled for!" Texas complained.

"We will try to form America *without Hawaii and Rhode Island,*" DC concluded, preventing his siblings from rambling on for the next hour. Russia nodded in response, hoping it'll work and also partially overwhelmed by the number of unfamiliar people speaking.

DC turned to the states and territories. After a few shared glances, DC laughed and said, "Group hug?" Several states laughed as well, and they huddled together. Gradually, they began to glow white, the glowing light merging and shifting into a human shape. After a few more moments of shifting, the light faded away to reveal America.

Russia felt relief wash over him. America looked at Russia and then Canada blankly before his face seemed to *melt*. Horror instantly replaced Russia's relief. America glowed again, turning back into the white light, before aggressively shifting and moving around, before "popping" to reveal the states and territories, all of them bickering with each other.

"What the fuck were you guys doing, we were making it work!" Texas shouted out.

"You were the one messing it up!" Virginia yelled back.

West Virginia scoffed, "Oh, you're one to fucking speak."

Kansas yelled out, "Oh my *god* guys, stop arguing!"

"You're not helping!" Arkansas replied.

"Oh, shut up, Ar-Kansas." Louisiana retorted, purposefully saying the name wrong.

"Shut the fuck up yourself, *Louis*-sianna," Mississippi remarked sourly.

Cali, nearly at her wit's end, yelled out louder than she ever has been before, "Can all of you *shut up for five seconds!*"

The bickering, sour, and angered states quickly shut up, shocked by their sister's outburst. Cali, exasperated, said, "*Thank you.*" She sighed, "DC, problem report."

DC, who was heavily in thought despite his loud sibling's bickering, jumped at the sound of his name, turning to face California. Cali repeated what she said, "Problem report, DC."

DC bit his lip, "There's nothing wrong with *us*, it's just that..."

"Spit it out," Russia muttered, growing frustrated and tired of the states already. How is America even able to handle them?

DC cast a quick glance towards Russia before looking expectantly at his siblings, "Do you guys remember Dad's *emergency plan?"*

Several states responded at the same time, the loudest being Texas and Cali, with Cali saying, "Of course I remember the emergency plan," and Texas confusedly asking, "The whosit whatsit?"

Cali looked at Texas in disbelief, "Please tell me you're kidding."

Texas pursed his lips before doing finger guns and clicking his tongue, "I wish I could, darlin'."

"*Never* do that again," Cali warned, an annoyed and slightly weirded out look on her face. "You're going to encourage Alabama and I *don't* need that right now."

"What? I wasn't doing anything!" Texas protested, motioning with his hands as he spoke.

"Alabama *won't* see it that way, you know that."

Alabama looked up at the two of them like they were both idiots, which, let's be honest here, they probably were, "You guys know that I'm standing right here, ri-"

"Just explain this 'emergency plan' that *apparently* existed," Texas huffed, crossing his arms and effectively cutting Alabama off. Alabama, realizing they couldn't see him because he was shorter than them, went to go cry in the corner.

DC looked at Russia and Canada, "Yeah, explaining it is probably for the best. Those two have a right to know."

"What?" Texas protested, "No, no, no, I'm not letting that commie know our plan. He's going to betray us down the line, I just know it."

"America loves him, he's staying," DC calmly responded, causing many states to yell out "what?!" and "I *knew* that Dad had a boyfriend" and "So does that mean we have two Dads?" For the record, most of them yelled out an angry and surprised "WHAT?!"

"Either way," DC continued, gesturing for his siblings to calm down. When they didn't calm down, he just said dismissively, "This is what you get for screwing around in America's mind. Just ask Russia later, I'm sure he'll explain it to you."

Russia gave DC a puzzled look, "What? I didn't sign up for this-"

DC cut him off, "Doesn't matter, we have a right as his kids to interrogate you. *Anyway*, I believe it was around World War II when

Dad first told us about his emergency plan."

"We were scared as hell then," Oklahoma commented.

"Yeah, so Dad told us about this emergency plan he created. I'm pretty sure it was supposed to calm us down, though plenty of us got freaked out about it anyway because of the possible implications," DC continued, only to be rudely cut off again.

"We thought he was gonna die. You know, kapooey," Washington clarified.

"Guys, please stop interrupting me," DC asked. Seeing his siblings nod or giggle, he continued his explanation once again, "So, he said-"

"-Very anxiously-" Alaska cut in, laughing to himself. Several other states giggled. Russia raised an eyebrow. He didn't know why, but Alaska looked eerily familiar.

DC's eye twitched a little bit, "I swear to god-"

Alaska laughed and held his hands up in fake surrender, "It's not our fault you keep hashing over important details!"

"That was 'important' to you?!"

"Why, of course, it was." Alaska responded 'professionally.'

"God, I hate all of you," DC rubbed his temple and a few more states laughed.

Someone shouted out, "Love you too!" And DC grumbled, murmuring, "Yeah, yeah."

He continued, increasing his volume to show his frustration, "America 'anxiously'" DC spat the word out, glaring at Alaska, who looked like he was desperately trying to hold in laughter, "told us about how serious the war- especially in Asia- was getting. Because of the way we united, with his consciousness as his own and not made up of an amalgamation of ours, if he died, he would be dead forever, unlike other unifications throughout history whose minds

were made up of their pieces- Austria-Hungary, for example. He realized this and told us that if he went under so much mental or physical trauma that we split and he died, his mind would be split between us so that he wouldn't actually die- even if his body did. If that makes any sense. Once we split, we could just remerge straight afterwards, alive body or not.

"We could, after all, just create a new body with our shared strength," DC continued, "It was a foolproof plan, really- as long as every one of us is there and alive, we could reform America whenever."

"Oh, I *do* remember that," Texas remarked.

DC nodded, "But... that's the problem, it only works if we're all there to unite in the first place. We're missing someone right now."

"Rhode Island and Hawaii?" Canada suggested.

DC simply shook his head, "No, it isn't them. They split off early, so they wouldn't be the missing pieces. If they were, we would've all split when they did."

Illinois's eyes widened, "Holy shit, you don't think..."

DC grimaced, nodding "Yeah, I do. America wouldn't know about his betrayal, and he's the only person we're missing right now other than Rhode Island and Hawaii..."

California's eyes widened, "Wait a second, what if Confederate figures this out?"

Texas glanced at her, "How should that matter?"

DC felt his heart drop, "Oh god, Cali, you're right. What if he figures this out?"

Texas narrowed his eyes, "How would he find out?"

Cali rolled her eyes, "He's been watching us for years. It's only a matter of time before he figures it out, he knows us better than we would like to admit... He *was* able to take us down, after all."

Texas scoffed, "Surely he'd have enough human decency not to-"

"We don't know how much they trust and rely on each other, it's a possibility that we can't ignore," California interrupted.

DC started biting his nails, "If Confederacy found out... do you really think he would be willing to kill his only ally for a silly grudge?"

"Oh, he's a spiteful bitch, he totally would," Cali growled.

The states, catching onto what they were getting at, worriedly started talking over each other in hushed, fearful voices.

Russia, feeling sick of being left out, loudly asked, "What's going on?"

DC, suddenly remembering that Russia and Canada existed, frowned, fumbling with his thoughts and words. Finally grasping the right words, he said, "We're missing a piece of America's mind, and the only person who could reasonably have it is Puerto Rico."

Delaware grimaced, nodding, "And, if we've learned anything over the years, it's that Confederacy is more spiteful and deceiving than anyone we've ever met."

"Long story short," Oregon fiddled with his fingers, "If Confederacy figures out Puerto Rico has the final piece of America's mind that we need to reform..."

Cali's eyes glinted with anger and hatred as she clenched her fists, spitting out, "Then he wouldn't hesitate to kill Puerto Rico just to ensure that Dad never comes back."

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These past few chapters have been fun, haven't they? Honestly, this chapter, in particular, was just a really big plot dump. I do, however, have an official drawing of Confederate's design for when he's in control of America's body, so do with that what you will.
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[image]

(Also, yes, I am aware that I missed a few stars. Shush, I ran out of space)

Ch 34: Brother \ The Possible New Ally

Two pairs of feet pattered on a concrete floor. One consistent, regulated, and heavy, the other lighter, more hurried, and less noticeable.

The person responsible for the lighter footsteps, Puerto Rico, shivered, disliking the quietness and eeriness of the alleyway. Confederate had set him down a while ago when he was sure they weren't being followed. Speaking of which... Puerto Rico glanced up at Confederate. There was a thoughtful callousness to his expression that made Puerto Rico unexplainably uneasy.

Puerto Rico looked around them suspiciously, talking in a hushed tone, "What happened back there? How were you so quick in taking over America's body? I thought you had to kill him, right?"

Confederate scowled, and Puerto Rico warily eyed him. Confederate grumbled something to himself before responding, "He wasn't there."

Puerto Rico stopped walking, a look of alarm on his face, "He... what?"

Feeling a prick of unexplainable irritation, Confederate growled out, "He wasn't there. He was gone. He escaped. I don't know how."

"Where is he then?" Puerto started walking again, at a quicker pace to catch up to Confederate.

"I don't know, and I don't care. He either destroyed his own mind somehow or transferred it to one of the states. He probably went to DC, actually, if I'm being realistic," Confederate grumbled, his eyes glinting slightly in the dim light.

Puerto Rico looked at the ground thoughtfully, "What does this

mean for our plan?"

"Our pla- oh, of course, our plan," Confederate grumbled, casting an irritated glance at Puerto Rico. For some reason he couldn't explain, Confederate was in a really bad mood. Maybe it was the headache, or maybe it was the fact that Puerto Rico wouldn't shut up. Probably both, "I doubt the plan will change much. Whether America is alive or not doesn't affect you in the slightest."

Puerto Rico rolled his eyes, choosing to ignore Confederate's hostility for the most part, "No duh, of course, it won't affect me, but we both know it'll affect you."

Confederate paused, clenching and unclenching his hands for a few moments before walking again at a brisk pace, "*It* is not me."

Puerto Rico looked to the side, muttering lowly, "I believe that less and less each day."

Confederate narrowed his eyes, directing his glare at Puerto Rico, "I *heard* that, you know."

Puerto Rico sighed, "Please, just answer my question. If there's going to be a problem, as your ally, I deserve to know."

Confederate felt frustration build inside him. Logically, he knew that there was nothing wrong with Puerto Rico's concerns, but a voice deep inside him grumbled and hissed. Confederate blinked, widening his eyes in surprise. He glanced at Puerto Rico for a moment, before looking straight ahead, his lips forming into a grim frown. No, it wasn't him who felt this way, was it? No, no, these irrational feelings were *it's.* The lines between their emotions had become so blurred that Confederate couldn't tell between them, which is a problem Confederate will have to address later.

But why had they become blurred? In the mindscape, everything was focused, controlled, precise... but now everything was slipping from Confederate's controlled grasp like how beach sand would slip out of an open hand. What was *it* doing? Why was *it* acting up? Why was Confederate started to lose control over *it?*

... No, no... something was going on.

And Confederate didn't like one bit of it.

"There's not going to be a problem," Confederate replied coldly, trusting himself to keep *it* in check. "America is the least of our concerns. What we need to do right now is find some allies that can help us. We can't face Russia and the states alone, you know."

Puerto Rico nodded, "What about the aid and the family you promised me?"

Confederate chuckled, "Be patient, that will come in time. When this whole fiasco is over and you come out as the victor with me, everyone will clamber around you just to be your friend. Getting a family will be much easier then. Not only that, but when we win the war and *I* get the states, I'll be as rich as America was. So, yes, our deal is still very much intact. And, if you doubt me, you're free to leave. I promise I will not bother you ever again. But," Confederate paused and turned a little bit to face Puerto Rico, his red eyes glowing menacingly in the dim light, "I don't know if a certain 48 states, 4 territories, 1 district, 1 North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and a few world superpowers feel the same. I'm sure they would just *kill* to see you again."

Puerto Rico backed away just the slightest bit, a confused expression flickering onto his face, "What are you saying?"

"I'm simply saying the truth," Confederate answered, smirking as he faced forward and walked briskly once again. Puerto Rico gulped, watching him walk away to the end of the alleyway.

Confederate stopped walking, "Are you going to follow me or not?"

Puerto Rico hesitantly put one foot in front of the other, following Confederate. He felt himself shiver and gradually realized something as he followed Confederate out of the dim alleyway.

He wasn't in control of any of this anymore, was he?

--x--

"So, what's the plan?" Puerto Rico asked Confederate as they hid in an alleyway near the hotel where all the countries were staying. They were close enough to see the entrance, but they weren't close enough to see any specific details. Theoretically, they could head inside, but there might be some countries inside that can recognize them. Not to mention, Confederate knew that one guard was posted outside the section of the hotel where the countries were staying, just to make sure that no extremists would try to assassinate them during their stay. Well, I mean, obviously that wasn't the only guard, but America didn't have any control over where the guards were, that was UN's duty. Thus, Confederate had no way of knowing where they all were, which meant that if news spreads quickly around here, he was already a wanted man. And, personally, he would rather not be caught on the first day.

"Hmm," Confederate thought. He cast a glance at Puerto Rico before grinning. He couldn't sacrifice himself; but luckily for him, he had a very dispensable island right in front of him, "Do you think the receptionist and the guard inside are idiots?"

Puerto Rico blinked, "Huh? Why do you ask?"

"Just answer the question."

Puerto Rico rolled his eyes before looking through the glass door to see the receptionist, "They don't look like the smartest people, no."

"Do you think they could reasonably mix up your flag with Cuba's?" Confederate asked.

Puerto Rico's head whipped towards Confederate's direction, "No. You're not... Are you going to make me pose as Cuba? Why can't you pose as America? You have his body and everything!"

Confederate grinned, loving this way too much, "No can do. They'd know about America's collapse or maybe even his death, me showing up as America would be way too suspicious. Cuba, however, wouldn't be acknowledged all that much."

Puerto Rico emphatically shook his head, "No, no way. I'm not doing it."

Confederate scoffed, "Come on, this is our only shot. Just man up already. You just go in there, ask for Cuba's room number, then help me in, and then we can convince Cuba to be our ally together. "

Puerto Rico sighed before looking at Confederate questioningly, "Why Cuba?"

"Because he hates America almost as much as me, and for that I respect him," Confederate replied simply.

Puerto Rico groaned before muttering, "Fine! You owe me one."

Confederate grinned, "Have fun."

"I hate you," Puerto Rico spat.

Grumbling, Puerto Rico headed up to the receptionist. He walked up to the front desk, suddenly hyper-aware of how short he was. He felt like a little kid. Not receiving a "hello" or "how can I help you," Puerto Rico awkwardly cleared his throat. The receptionist looked up from her computer before looking confused, eventually smiling when she finally looked down and saw Puerto Rico, "Hello, how can I help you?" She said in a saccharine tone.

"Hola, I'm sorry for being a bother, but I forgot my room number." Puerto Rico lied through his teeth, making up a story as he went. He gritted his teeth a little bit. Confederate owed him big time.

"Oh, of course! I can pull up your room number right here. What's your country?" The receptionist chirped.

"I'm Cuba-" Puerto Rico started, but was rudely cut off.

"The fuck-" An eerily familiar voice to Puerto Rico's left said. Puerto Rico turned to see the origin of the voice.

"Oh shit." Puerto Rico cursed under his breath.

"Yes, oh shit is *right*," Cuba responded, an unreadable look on his face. He glanced around the room, looking at the guard, then at Puerto Rico, and finally at the receptionist. He sighed loudly, giving

Puerto Rico a *you better fucking play along* glare before saying, "You know, you could've just asked me if you wanted to come to my room, not be a stalker about it."

Puerto Rico instantly played along, saying in an equally annoyed voice, "Well, then it wouldn't be a surprise!"

Cuba forced a chuckle before waving Puerto Rico to follow, "Come on," He then turned and walked past the guard. Puerto Rico followed him, trying not to slip up under the guard's watchful stare. When they were finally far enough away from the guard, Puerto Rico let out a breath he didn't know he was holding, relief flooding him. But, unfortunately for Puerto Rico, he wasn't quite in the clear yet.

Cuba turned around, facing Puerto Rico and giving him a glare. Actually, wait, no, that might just be Cuba's resting face, "Why are you here? No, scrap that, *how* are you here? I thought that the bastard annexed you just like he did with Guam and Philippines all those years ago."

Puerto Rico clicked his tongue awkwardly. For one, Philip never actually joined them in America's mind. It's quite a long story, actually, but it's for another day. Secondly... "Yeah, about that... America split apart."

Cuba blinked in surprise, before quickly bouncing back to his normal expression and glaring again, "Are you being serious, or are you messing with me?"

"I am being very serious, excuse you," Puerto Rico snapped back, "Do you really think he would just let me go like that without a catastrophic event like him splitting apart happening?"

"You-" Cuba tried to argue, but then he paused, actually thinking about it, "Actually, that does make some sort of sense. I wouldn't put it past him to be so wrapped up in his own shit that he'd forget you existed and never address the fun little pickle you and the other American territories are wrapped in," Cuba laughed lightly to himself, "He'd forget about you before he even had the thought of giving you your freedom."

"Ouch," Puerto Rico commented.

"What? Am I wrong?" Cuba asked, glancing down at Puerto Rico with an icy cold stare.

Puerto Rico pursed his lips before letting out a sorrowful chuckle, "No, you're probably right, and that's what hurts."

Cuba cast Puerto Rico a sympathetic look before quickly becoming cold once again, "So, why are you here? What do you want?"

"You hate America, right?" Puerto Rico asked.

Cuba scoffed, "What, do I need to make it more obvious?"

Puerto Rico smiled, "Sorry, just making sure. Well, how would you like it if America was gone for good? How would you like it if you got to see America replaced by your personal ally? All of his money, military, and resources, without having to deal with America himself?"

Cuba raised an eyebrow, "I'm interested, but who is this magical replacement?"

"You help me sneak him into your suite, and you'll get to see for yourself."

Cuba grinned, "Why not? It's about time I defied that pompous UN. So, what's your grand plan?"

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Cuba sighed, sitting down on his chair, "That was way too anticlimactic."

Puerto Rico gave him a look, "What did you expect us to suggest?"

"Something more fun." Cuba huffed, pointing at Confederate with his thumb, "Like launching him into my room. That would've been fun, seeing an American launched into a building."

Confederate scoffed, taking off the glasses Cuba had lent him and

putting them on the counter, "No, that would be stupidly risky. As long as you could give me sunglasses to conceal my eyes and were there as a confirmation factor, all we had to do was walk here together."

Puerto Rico glanced at Confederate, "Actually, what about the problem you talked about earlier? About how it would be risky if you walked in?"

"They didn't react to you walking in, so I'm guessing the guard hadn't memorized any flags, he was just looking to make sure that only countryhumans enter. He wasn't there to stop people like me, they're there to stop normal humans from entering. Not only that, but the fact he didn't stop you also proves that the guards don't know about America's death yet."

Puerto Rico looked at Confederate, startled. He was about to say something, but Cuba spoke first.

Cuba's eyes widened, "Wait, America's dead?! I thought he just split?"

Puerto Rico winced, "Technically, he's alive but-"

"But there's no way he's coming back," Confederate said firmly, interrupting Puerto Rico. "Not if I can help it."

Cuba grinned, "Well that's a fun turn of events. Man, I wish I could've seen it for myself. I wonder how loud he screamed..." Puerto Rico cast Cuba a slightly horrified look while Confederate didn't react at all. Cuba cleared his throat, smirking, "So, what's your proposal anyway?"

Confederate smirked back, "And I thought you'd never ask. I'm not sure if Puerto Rico's already told you this, but I am currently in control of America's body, which means that I can unite with all of America's pieces with little complications. When they come under my control, all of America's power is mine. When that happens, you could be my ally. I could help you conquer the Caribbean, minus Puerto Rico, of course, if you so please. All I need is help and support getting to America's pieces in the first place."

Cuba narrowed his eyes, getting the sense that this was all too good to be true. "What's the catch?"

"Russia's involved in all of this, and I wouldn't put it past America's family to involve themselves as well," Confederate steadily responded.

"Then, no," Cuba replied bluntly, standing up and heading over to the kitchen portion of his suite, "Unfortunately for you guys, I don't have a death wish."

Confederate frowned, narrowing his eyes just the slightest bit, "What if I got China, North Korea, and Iran on board?"

Cuba paused, before laughing like a maniac and turning back around to face Confederate, "You crazy bastard, is that your plan? Getting the help of all of America's enemies, stealing America's power, and then causing a world war?"

Confederate coolly smiled back and Cuba's eyes widened, before he burst into laughter once again, "You're crazy, you know that? If we lose, we're all toast!"

"But what if we win?" Confederate responded evenly. Cuba quieted, and Confederate took that as his chance to seal the deal, "If we win, NATO's core will be gone, and Russia will be taken out as well. If we win, there will no longer be as many pesky European countries trying to 'keep the peace.' You'll no longer have everyone up your ass all the time. You'll be able to take what's rightfully yours."

"And what's that?" Cuba replied, eyeing Confederate.

"Your freedom, all the land you could ever want, the victory you deserve... and vengeance for Soviet's death."

Cuba glancing up at Confederate, a little shocked. He chuckled, looking to the side, "Yes... Yes, that would be nice. But... we are fighting against Soviet's son. You realize that, right? It would not be right to fight in Soviet's name while fighting against his son..."

"He's a traitor to his line," Confederate spat. "He befriended and fell in love with America, the one person Soviet hated the most. He

rejected his father's ideals. He's no true son of Soviet, and you know it."

Cuba nodded slightly at his same thoughts being bounced back at him. Lately, Russia had changed. Cuba didn't like that. He didn't like how Russia and that American bastard became friends- probably something even more than that, judging by how much they hung out together- despite the cold war and everything Soviet tried so hard to preserve. Yes, Cuba agreed with what Confederate said- the Russia of today is a man Soviet never would have been proud of. Realizing something, Cuba looked at Confederate, "I'm surprised you know all of this... how?"

Confederate scoffed, restlessly walking around the room while Cuba kept an eye trained on his every move, "I've been watching America for longer than you could ever know."

Cuba chuckled slightly, looking out the window, "I don't doubt that," His eyes became distant as he looked beyond the New York Horizon. Cuba set his lips in a grim line as conflict brewed in his brain. Eventually, he turned to Confederate, his mind decided, "If you can convince the others to join your cause, I will join you as well, but I will not join you any sooner than that. I refuse to be a part of a war I have no chance of winning. Though I might wish to avenge my friend, I will not do so at the cost of my own life."

Cuba walked over to the counter, picking up his sunglasses, a piece of paper, and a pen. Writing something down, he said, "Here, here's China's room number. I'm sorry, but I don't know anyone else's- I'm not too close with the others. I'll tell him you're coming, too," He then passed the slip of paper to Confederate.

Confederate nodded, giving Cuba a confident grin as he took the slip of paper, "I'll see you again soon, next time as an ally."

Cuba grinned, turning to Puerto Rico, "I like this one, you chose an ally well."

Puerto Rico shrugged, "You haven't seen the worst of him yet."

Cuba laughed, unafraid of Puerto Rico's remark, "Maybe one day I

will. Until then, brother."

Puerto Rico blinked, looking up at Cuba with a surprised look on his face. Not before long, however, it melted into a large smile, "Yeah, until next time... brother."

And with those words being said, Confederate and Puerto Rico left Cuba's suite. Confederate looked down at the paper, reading and memorizing China's room number, "Come on, we're going to China's room. China's bound to have all their phone numbers, so we can call them all to the same place and secure three allies at once."

Puerto Rico nodded, not really hearing Confederate as he thought back to what Cuba said, *'Brother...'* Puerto Rico thought, repeating the word over and over again in his head. A warm, childish smile settled on his face as pure happiness overwhelmed Puerto Rico.

'This time will be different,' He thought as he hurriedly followed after Confederate.

'It just has to be, right?'

Ch 35: Forgiveness \ The Story of Aleut, Aima, and Aisa

Sitting on the roof of the hospital, Russia had a strange urge to grab some vodka. He was by no means an alcoholic, but the urge was there, promising to drown away what was dwelling in his heart and mind.

Russia put his hand over his eyes, trying to fight against the tears that threatened to fall. Adrenaline can only hold emotions at bay for so long, after all. Now, all of Russia's numbed emotions were crashing down on him, sending him into tidal wave after tidal wave of sorrow and worry. Using the hand that was covering his eyes, Russia rubbed away the tears already falling down his cheeks, letting his hand numbly fall to the ground when he had wiped his stupid tears away.

Staring up at the sky, Russia scowled. It was such a bright spring day, but Russia suddenly wished the sky would darken and rain would fall. He didn't understand how the world could be happy without America. He didn't understand any of it. Sure, America could come back... but he also may not. Russia frowned, leaning back against the wall surrounding the stairwell. How pathetic. The love of Russia's life confessed to him, and yet Russia couldn't say anything back. He just sat there like a dumbass. Why couldn't he say anything? Why couldn't Russia say just how much he loved America back? Why couldn't he squeeze America tightly and say those three words? Why couldn't he *do* something?

Oh, Russia would give anything to go back to that moment. He would give anything just to hold America tightly and say that he loved that stupid candy cane too. Maybe America could've become *his* stupid candy cane.

Russia's body racked as he let out a loud sob, hugging himself. He didn't want to cry alone, and yet here he was, sobbing on the roof without America by his side.

America...

Russia could never explain it. To any logical person, his love for that dork is illogical- nonsensical. Heck, Russia wouldn't be able to explain it himself. He didn't know how it happened. He didn't know how he came to love America so much. He didn't know how or why or anything, really. All he knows is that he would do anything for America to just sit next to him on this lonely rooftop. He would do anything to protect America and his stupid, annoying, beautiful, adorable, cute smile.

The sound of a door opening suddenly came from Russia's right and Russia quickly wiped away his tears, trying to look as normal as possible before whoever just came onto the roof saw him bawling his eyes out. Russia glanced to his right, seeing a countryhuman taller than France facing him. The countryhuman had a navy blue flag with golden stars in specific formations on it. The countryhuman smiled, sitting down next to Russia while saying, "There you are! I was looking to see where you went."

Though Russia didn't know who this person was, he could only assume that he was one of America's states. The state smiled, "I kinda thought you'd stick around for longer and, *you know,* hear the entire plan."

Russia rolled his eyes, "Isn't that why you're here? To tell me about the plan?"

The state laughed, "Hell no! DC would never let me escape that hospital room under any circumstances!"

Russia eyed him, "Then how did you slip out and what are you here for?"

The state noticed Russia's tense state and remarked, "You'd think someone in love with my Dad would trust his kids more."

"You're avoiding the question."

The state shrugged, "I asked for Washington to make a distraction so I could slip out and talk to you," The state looked at Russia's flag

and then at Russia's ushanka with a sorrowful smile, "I'm going to take a guess and say that you aren't the Russia I knew, though. Your flag is the same as his was when we first met, but you aren't the same person. I can just tell."

Russia blinked in surprise and cast a curious look at the state to his right, "The Russia you knew?"

The state nodded, "I'm Alaska. I, uh..." He scratched the back of his neck nervously, "Do you know someone named Russian Empire?"

Russia pursed his lips, "I know *of* him, but I never knew him personally. He died before I was ever born," Russia paused before adding, "He's my grandfather."

Alaska exhaled softly, turning back to the horizon as the sad smile returned to his face, "I guessed so..."

"Did you know him?" Russia asked, turning back to the horizon. To say he was curious was an understatement. The most he knew about his grandfather was from books and journals- all his father would ever say about Russia's grandfather was that he was a 'stubborn and selfish prick' with the occasional curse word thrown in there somewhere.

Alaska grimaced, "Yes, I knew him. Maybe I knew him too well, but I guess I'll never know now. For the longest time, I saw him as my father, even though he wasn't biologically so."

Russia looked at Alaska, reasoning and hoping that Alaska's story will distract Russia from his overwhelming emotions, "Do you want to tell me about him?"

Alaska nodded slowly, looking down to the ground, "Yes... I really, really do." Russia gestured for Alaska to continue, and he did, "When the colonial countryhumans of long ago came to the new world, they did one of three things upon colonizing: they had a child with the native country human as a symbol of peace, only to kill the local countryhuman shortly after; they sent one of their own children to conquer the continent without having to mix with the natives to produce an heir that will rule over the region; or they

took a local countryhuman child and either forced, taught, or coerced that child to rule over the region for them, taking advantage of both a child and an entire native population in one fell swoop. Of those three, I was the third option," Feeling something on his cheek, Alaska foreignly wiped away his own tears.

Russia looked at him sympathetically, "You don't have to tell me this if you don't want-"

Alaska interrupted him, "No, please, I've wanted to tell this story to the Russian Empire or one of his descendants for so long. I *want* to tell you this," Russia frowned and nodded hesitantly, letting Alaska continue with his story.

Alaska shakily nodded back, reeling his emotions in, "I was a child when Russians first appeared on my mother's islands. My mother's name was Aleut, and she represented the Aleuts as a whole, rather than the individual tribes. I also had a younger sister. Like me, she had no name of her own as we were blank then- countryhumans who don't represent a people or a landmass. So, my sister and I gave each other similar names that we would call each other. I called her Aima, and she eventually started calling me Aisa back. We had no real father, as both of us were made from our mother's energy alone. In a way, the local Aleut men tried to step in as our father figure, but, selfishly enough, I didn't want a *human* father. I wanted a father who was like me- I wanted a countryhuman father.

"Before the Russians ever came to our island, things were peaceful. Perfect, in a way. Every day was spent with endless joy, fun, and games. But then, one day, giant boats appeared on the horizon. The boats were larger than any boats we had ever seen before, and these strange men from the giant boats landed on our island. When we could finally understand them, we discovered that they were searching for furs. When they found out about the local seal and otter populations you could find near my homeland, they asked where to find them. We told them where they were, trying to help, and they left for the animals shortly after. Not before long, more and more Russians showed up and I quickly picked up their language, all too happy to help them while the rest of the Aleuts were starting to become wary of them. Noticing that I was a blank, they murmured a phrase I didn't understand at the time- Russian

Empire- and left. It wasn't until many months later that an insanely tall man with fancy clothes showed up on our island: the Russian Empire himself. Back then, he had the same flag as you, Russia. Anyway, not knowing about my mother or my sister since neither had shown themselves in front of the Russians like I had, the Russian Empire offered to adopt me and 'teach me his ways.' Excited by the strange colors on his face just like my family and excited by the fact I could have a countryhuman father, I quickly said yes. He smiled at my response. A smile I had been so happy to see back then. He stayed on the island for a few days teaching me exactly what he wanted me to do. I was all too happy to oblige, feeling like all those father-son moments I had missed out on in my early childhood had been fulfilled. After about a week and a half, he had to leave, despite me not wanting him to. He smiled, praised me for doing so well throughout the past week with what he had told me to do, and told me that if I did everything that was asked of me, he'd return one day and we could be together again."

Alaska paused in his story, slipping an iron ring off of his hand that Russia hadn't noticed before, "When I promised that I would do my best, he gave me a flag- his flag, the same flag you have today- and reached into his pant's pocket, handing me this iron ring that shined kinda like how snow would. I thought it was a sign he cared about me but..." Alaska twisted the ring around, showing a small thin crack on the ring, "but the reality of it all was that it was a broken ring, which meant that it was worthless to him. What he was really doing was giving me his leftovers. He didn't love me. He didn't care about me, he just wanted me to do his dirty work for him."

Alaska sighed, his head hanging low, "Which I did, with little to no hesitation. Every day, I would go out and hunt for the Russians who had now made a permanent settlement on our island. Even when they started capturing wives and children to force the local men to hunt and get furs for them, I turned a blind eye, stuck in my own naive world that my 'father' would never let his men do such a thing. Eventually, they stopped upon orders by their empress, but the damage was done, and they quickly realized tensions were too high for peace at that point. So, they quickly turned back to violence. After all that, I was the only one who willingly helped them. My people started calling me a traitor behind my back, but I

was so wrapped up in the hope that the Russian Empire would come back and tell me about how proud he was for all I'd done, that I ignored my own people. But, as the animals started disappearing, my people were coerced to go into more dangerous waters to find the furs.

"One night, when I went home to my mother, she begged me to stop helping them. She told me that these Russians were horrible people and they were taken advantage of me. She said that she hated seeing me like this and this needed to stop," Alaska winced, his tears falling down his cheeks, "but I didn't believe her. I told her that they weren't bad people and that I would continue helping them. She gave me a disgusted look and, with a hardening expression, said something I will never forget till the day I die. Translated into English, she said, 'Whoever you are, you are *not* my son,'" Alaska put his hand to his mouth, his tears rolling down his cheeks with no stop. Trying to comfort the poor state, Russia put his hand on Alaska's shoulder.

Collecting himself again, Alaska continued, "After she said that, I stormed off, hurt, upset, and angry," Alaska laughed bitterly and sorrowfully, "Little did I know, that was the last thing she said to me before she died. For the next few months, she led a rebellion against the Russians. I didn't see her at all until the day the rebellion was shut down cruelly by the Russians. I walked into the square, blood and bodies everywhere... it *horrified* me. The cruelty and abuse I had been willfully ignoring this entire time out of a belief that the Russians were good people was shoved straight into my face. In the middle of the clearing were my mother and my sister. My mother-" Alaska choked on his words, "M-my mother was a body on the ground... a-and my sister was next to mom's dead body, begging and pleading for her to wake up. That the fight wasn't over. Mom's body seemed so frail and weak on the ground- nothing like what she was when she was alive. I staggered up to her body and collapsed when I got to her side. She was long dead. In that moment, I realized who the Russians on our island really were. They were monsters, murderers. People who wouldn't hesitate to kill if that person inconvenienced them in the slightest. In a split second, I was dragged back to reality. I regretted so much in that moment... but out of everything, I regretted not coming to my

senses sooner, hugging my mother tight," Alaska hugged himself, as if he was acting along with his story, "and telling her that I loved her. I regret not telling her that she was more important to me than some tyrant across the sea..."

Alaska laughed bitterly. Russia felt his heart swell in pity and second-hand guilt. Maybe his grandfather truly was as bad as Russia's father made him out to be. Alaska shook his head, his arms falling to his sides, "But we can't see the future: we're human. I had made my choice. A bad one, yes, but it is one that I have lived with ever since. I begged my sister, who was still screaming and yelling for mom to get up, to stop yelling. I told her, yelling in grief, that mom was dead," Alaska sniffled. "She didn't listen to me. She just kept on screaming and begging and pleading... my heart couldn't handle it. So, I grabbed her and dragged her away from mom. When I had brought her far enough away, her screaming and yelling shifted towards me. She pointed at me, her hand shaking just the slightest bit, and yelled that I had no right to be here. That I had no right to drag her away," Alaska shook his head softly, "I couldn't help but agree with her. She pushed her way past me before stopping where she stood, her back facing mine. I couldn't see her face, but I could hear her voice: heartbroken and betrayed. She told me she never wanted to see me again. She told me to leave and never come back... because I was no longer her brother."

Alaska looked down to the ground, fighting off tears. Russia's brows furrowed, but before he could say anything, Alaska said, "From that point on, I stayed far away from our village and when the Russians demanded that I- as Russian America- needed to move to a different island, I took that as my chance to fulfill Aima's- now called Aleut, our mother's name, by our people- wish. I moved from my homeland to Kodiak, where I stayed for around twelve years. Then I followed them to Sitka, where I would stay until I merged with America. I followed my Russian colonizers like a shadow, saying nothing and only doing the bare minimum to stay alive. When I became more and more worthless to them as a colony, they spoke of selling me off. I didn't care. My life had collapsed when my mother died. I had no purpose, no reason to live. There wasn't a night where I didn't see my dead mother in my dreams, and there wasn't a day where I didn't want to be dead along with her. If I'm

being honest, I blamed myself for her death, and, over time, suicide became a common thought. On October 18, 1867, six months after I was originally sold, the official hand over ceremony was held. It was the first time I had ever seen America, and the first time in over 80 years that I had seen the Russian Empire. He didn't even look my way. He just participated in the ceremony. After the ceremony concluded, I merged with America without even speaking a single word to the Russian Empire. Nowadays, I wish I had said something to him, but what was I supposed to say? Thanks for taking advantage of me as a little child? No, I had nothing to say to him back then, and it's foolish to believe that I had."

Alaska smiled. "As it turns out, being sold was the best thing that ever happened to me. Dad, a *true* dad this time, and the others filled my days with such happiness. I felt like I had finally found a home again. A family again. Over time, my life gradually gained meaning. I talked to the others and even though they were awful at comforting me most of the time, they always made sure that I knew how much they loved me as their brother. It took a while, but after many, many years, I felt whole again."

Russia's brows furrowed, "But? Where do I come into all of this?"

Alaska turned to Russia, a wide smile on his face despite his red eyes and tear-stained cheeks, "But there's one more thing I've always wanted to do. One more thing I've always wanted to say. I wanted to say this to your grandfather, but you'll have to do."

Alaska took a deep breath in before continuing, "I forgive your grandfather. He abandoned me, ruined my life, ripped my mother away from me, and let me live in a cruel, naive dream for years, but I forgive him. For the longest time, I hated and loathed him with my entire being... but... he also gave me some of the happiest moments of my life: being with my new family. I do not want to live in an endless cycle of hate, so this is where my past is set free. This is where I am set free," Alaska turned to the horizon, grateful tears on his cheeks.

Russia found himself smiling softly, "I'm glad I can help?"

Alaska nodded, leaning back against the wall, "But I suppose I also

told you this because I wanted to comfort you."

Russia became confused, "Comfort me? How?"

"Because just like me, I know Puerto Rico can forgive," Alaska nodded to himself. "Our situations were different, yes, but they're also kinda similar. He feels lied to, betrayed. I felt the same way. He won't forgive easily, no one ever can, but even he's bound to realize that running away with the help of Confederacy won't fix his problems. Running away never fixes anything," Alaska sighed. "I don't know what he's gone through in life, but when you've hit rock bottom, the only way to go is up, right? Things will never be the same for any of us again, but that shouldn't be seen as a bad thing..." Alaska smiled softly and nervously, "I guess what I'm trying to say is that I have this feeling that at the end of this, we'll all be okay, you know? Things *will* be different, but just like how things were for me, I know our story will have a happy ending, even if it takes years to reach it. America *is* coming back. He's too stubborn to die. At the end of the day, I believe we just have to have hope."

Alaska stood up, a smile on his face, "Come on, let's catch the end of DC's rambling."

Russia awkwardly smiled back, getting up himself. Following Alaska down the staircase, he felt his mind grasp onto the small shard of hope Alaska gave him.

Yeah.

America's a prick too stubborn to die.

~~~~

ack, my uploading schedule is degenerating quickly-
~~~~

Ch 36: A Nightmare \ The Deal

Buzz Buzz

China looked outside through his window, looking down at the bustling city. Seeing New York was always his favorite part of these stupid meetings. Though it didn't compare in the slightest, seeing the bustling city below him always reminded him of his own home. Not to mention, he always loved watching things happen before him. He doesn't love being in action himself, but seeing others go about their day, fight with each other, or even watching someone do absolutely nothing gave China a sense of peace no one he knew could understand. Call him a creep, a watcher, or a stalker, but watching normal people bustling about on the streets will always be China's favorite part of the day.

Buzz Buzz

China sighed. Could his phone shut up? He was busy right now. Well, technically he wasn't, but this was the most peaceful part of his day, and he'd rather not waste it.

Buzz Buzz

Growing irritated, China pulled out his phone. He was half tempted to chuck it across the room before remembering that it might be something serious. He had three unread messages. Opening up his messaging app, China saw that they were from Cuba. His irritation being replaced by curiosity, China read Cuba's messages.

As he read, China's curiosity only spiked more. Well, he couldn't wait now. China clicked on his calling app, reckoning it would be better for everyone if he took a few choice calls.

Today was turning out to be very interesting...

--x--

"Well, this is turning out to be just swell," Confederate muttered.

Puerto Rico laughed to himself, "I don't know about you, but watching Iran ignore you was actually kinda funny."

Confederate's lip twitched, "Funny to you, not so much to me."

Confederate then stopped in front of a door, "Here we go, room 1586," Confederate clicked the small button to the right of the door, and a faint doorbell sound could be heard from inside the hotel suite. A few seconds later, the door opened to China, who was smiling.

"Come in," China motioned them inside and turned around, heading back to his window while saying, "And here I thought you'd be quicker."

Puerto Rico became confused, "What do you mean by that?"

"It's simple. Cuba messaged me about you two, so I did you a favor and called over everyone you were planning on allying yourself with, along with a few extras," China reached down and rotated a small tray with a teapot and a few teacups, "I also made tea."

Confederate walked inside, casting an uninterested glance at the tea before looking around the room, seeing North Korea, Iran, and Palestine. Huh, so this is why Iran was in such a hurry that he ignored the two people waiting outside his door. Due to the look on Iran's face, it doesn't even seem that Iran remembered them. Puerto Rico followed after Confederate, eyeing the tea before smiling, grabbing a cup, and sitting down on the only empty chair left.

China started, "I've heard of the basics of your plan already, but please, enlighten all of us on what you're trying to do."

Confederate, eyeing the room and clearing his throat, stated, "Well, it's simple. I'm trying to take down America and take everything he once had," A grin appeared on his face. "Or, well, take down whatever's left of him, anyway.

"And, I'm asking for your help to help me do the deed."

Iran butted in, "What do you mean by 'whatever's left of him?'"

Confederate blinked before laughing, "They haven't told you yet?! Ha! Someone's good at keeping secrets." Calming himself down, Confederate elaborated, "To put it simply, America's union isn't so *united* anymore. AKA, I broke his union apart."

"Can't he simply reform again?" Palestine added.

"I can guarantee he hasn't yet."

"How do you know?" Palestine asked, his eyes narrowing in suspicion.

"I just do," Confederate answered simply.

China looked straight at Confederate, looking scarily neutral about all this. He said rather slowly, "If I were to *hypothetically* help you, what would I- no, *we*- get out of it?"

Confederate shrugged, "I can't promise alliances, unfortunately, but I can promise that I won't intervene in anything you do. I can also give you a few bases if that isn't enough. My whole plan is to take America's place and pull out of NATO, so NATO will also be considerably weaker. I can also promise peace treaties and economic alliances between us. However, I can only follow through with these promises when I've finished taking over America."

All of the nations there except for China seemed to become even more interested than before. China, however, still had questions, "Who will we be against us in this war?"

Confederate paused before musing, "It depends."

Iran scowled, "What does *that* mean?"

Confederate grinned at Iran's irritation, "It means what it means. But, worst-case scenario, maybe Russia and NATO."

The mood in the room instantly dropped. NATO alone was one thing, but NATO *and* Russia? Even they knew that was an impossible task. Puerto Rico bit his lip in nervousness and slowly

set his teacup down, eyeing those around him just in case. Out of everyone, however, Iran, in particular, looked the most uncomfortable. After all, he couldn't say he was all that thrilled about possibly facing his ally in war.

China's face, which had been so neutral, suddenly became sour, "So you're saying that you want me to join a war against one of my greatest economic allies... so that you can live out the rest of your pathetic life?" China's eyes glinted menacingly and he walked up to Confederate, his eyes piercing into Confederate's, "As for your alliance offer? You can forget it. The war you're trying to wage is an impossible one, and I'd rather not be dragged down with you."

With that being said, China whipped back around, walking back to his window and looking out of it. Silence filled the room, and, glancing around the room and seeing everyone's uneasy faces, Confederate simultaneously realized two things. For one, he realized that no one here would fight for his cause. But he also realized...

A swell of hate that was not his one rushed over Confederate.

***We** do not need their armies.*

Yes, maybe Confederate doesn't even need their armies at all. However, he still needs funds and he still needs someone he can rely on for loans. Confederate's mind raced. In what future would NATO be deterred from joining Confederate's desperate fight for survival?

Another feeling that was not his- this time it was a strong sense of superiority- overcame Confederate's mind.

***We** are stronger than them.*

Yes, yes... Confederate was stronger than them, for now. If he is quick about this, he can take the continental US by storm. But where can he get the men for that? Would anyone even join his cause with Confederate's flag plastered all over it?

A distinct, foul odor suddenly filled Confederate's nose.

Do you smell that?

Smell what?

Him .

Confederate's eyes snapped open, and he looked around the room like a predator looking for its prey. The world around Confederate was sharpened, and though colors seemed duller, every other sense was heightened. Somewhere in the corner of Confederate's mind, he realized that this wasn't him, but that thought felt oddly disconnected. Separate. Like it wasn't even his thought in the first place. What was going on? Giddiness overcame Confederate, and his line of sight settled on Puerto Rico.

Him, him, him, him, him.

Thoughts that were not his own flooded Confederate and as soon as they came, Confederate jerked into action, taking back control of America's body. His senses dulled, and color seemed to return to the world around him. What had happened? Surely...

Confederate shook his head at that thought. No way. His shake also further confirmed the fact that Confederate had regained control. Even so, Confederate could've sworn that the word 'him' still echoed around his brain. Nevertheless, Confederate had to take back control of a different situation, the one concerning his potential allies. What could he do? *It* was right, he was at an advantage right now. How could he maximize that advantage while minimizing his own losses and the risk he'll have to take?

Confederate felt a grin form on his face. Why didn't he think of this sooner? It was the solution to all of his problems.

"What if I told you that you'd never have to be in a war at all? And what if I told you I could find a way to minimize international intervention?"

China turned around, a disbelieving look on his face.

Confederate smiled, already knowing that he'd won. He held his hand out for China to shake, "Instead of an alliance, let's make a

deal. I'm still offering all I mentioned before, but this time I only ask for one thing."

"And what is that?" China growled, not too pleased by Confederate's cocky nature in the face of defeat. It wasn't always the best decision to have an ally who didn't know when to quit.

"Funding. Under the table or upfront, it doesn't matter. As long as you give me enough funding, I promise I'll win the war."

China laughed at Confederate's craziness, "Win the war? As if. Don't you know who you're facing?"

"Yes, I do," Confederate replied, "I'm facing the states and a few ragtag territories," Confederate smile became smug, "I mean, why would I face anyone else if I'm only a measly isolationist rebellion originating from Rhode Island and Hawaii?"

--x--

Cuba was heading back to his suite when he received a message from China. Reading it, Cuba couldn't help but be surprised and impressed.

"Maldición **(Damn)**," He chuckled to himself. Whoever Confederate was, he was definitely a sweet talker if China's interested in him.

Cuba looked up from his phone and... *speak of the devil*. Cuba slid his phone into his pocket, "Hello, Confederate. I heard your deal went well."

"It did," Confederate confirmed, "If you don't mind, Cuba, I'd like to talk to you real quick."

Cuba raised a brow, "What would you like to talk about?"

Although it sounds like something coming out of a horror movie, Cuba could've sworn he saw Confederate's red irises glow an even brighter, infuriated red. Cuba felt his heart drop. What *was* this? Why was he suddenly frozen in place? Move, maldita sea! **(Godammit!)**

Confederate grinned, and a chill went down Cuba's spine, "I would like to make a deal with you. It concerns a small... liability I have. Come, let's talk about it in your room, shall we?" Confederate turned around, heading towards Cuba's suite while Cuba was stuck there, seemingly frozen to the floor.

Free from Confederate's stare, Cuba felt most of his overwhelming fear melt away, but some of it still lingered. Why was he so afraid? He was never afraid... he promised himself he would never fear again.

No, Cuba knew this feeling. He had felt it before. But... he hadn't felt it in so long. He thought he was past this primordial fear of his. Apparently he wasn't. But that look of Confederate's... It reminded Cuba of a man he had tried so hard to forget. A man who cared about no one but himself and his own sickening profits.

And Cuba knew... he knew, more than anyone else that whoever Confederate was, he was no longer human. Maybe he never was human in the first place.

No, he was a monster.

A demon.

...

A nightmare...

Cuba took a shaky step forward and followed this nightmare to his suite.

This all better be worth it.

--x--

Alaska, readying himself for DC's yelling, scolding, and worried ranting, opened the door to America's hotel room. As he had expected, all eyes snapped to him. In fact, as Alaska looked at all the people looking back at him, he noticed that there were a few more people than the last time he was in here. From the looks of it, Canada had invited Britain, France, Australia, and New Zealand

here.

But counting heads in a room wasn't what Alaska was preparing for. No, he was preparing for something else. Something that would happen in three, two...

"Where were you?!" DC yelled out in anger, "Why did you leave the room?! You could've been attacked or- even worse- killed!"

One.

Alaska sighed, walking up to Washington, murmuring a quiet thank you, and sitting down on the floor next to him. Alaska reassured DC, "Nothing was gonna happen. Confederate ran away. He's long gone by now, probably off to create some sort of plan. He never acts without one. You of all people should know this, DC."

DC frowned, his anger being replaced by worry, "But what if he hadn't gone far at all? What if you got hurt just like Hawaii and Rhode Island?"

Alaska frowned at the mention of Hawaii's name, feeling sorrow prick his heart. Hawaii was his best friend, after all. Alaska said, "I know you're worried, DC, but I can handle myself. I'm not a little kid."

"No, I'm not implying-" DC cut himself off, sighing loudly, "Just please don't do that again."

Alaska nodded. Russia, who felt kind of awkward walking in after that exchange, just stayed near the door. DC cast a glance in Russia's direction before sighing and saying, "I guess I'll say our plan again. I'm going to start by saying that, in theory, we could merge and have one of us take America's place until we recover Puerto Rico, but that's too risky simply because if we get caught, Confederate gains the entire power of the union in one fell swoop. So, instead, we, as a group, decided to make partners, trios, and a few groups of four based on who can live on their own as a country and who can't. Each strong state was paired up with a weaker state, with Texas and California both getting two weak partners. We also had a few groups of four- two strong states and two weak states-

simply due to weird borders. The pairings and groups, for the most part, are close together in proximity so that the stronger state can give the weaker state support and hopefully delay their collapse long enough to figure out how to get Puerto Rico back on our side and reform America."

"Collapse?" Russia questioned, concern evident in his voice.

California nodded, gesturing a little bit with her right hand, "A little less than half of us aren't stable enough or are barely stable enough to be countries. So, to delay their inevitable collapse due to this fact, we set up this system so that we can stabilize and support them for as long as possible."

"Who am I paired with?" Alaska asked, genuinely curious.

"As much as I wanted to force you to help someone, your resources are too far away to be beneficial to anyone right now, so Canada offered to take your place and chose to support North and South Dakota. But, if you want to, you can try to help out Guam and the territories in the Pacific," DC said.

"Yeah, I'll try to help them out," Alaska stated, nodding to himself.

"Anyway," DC continued, "For now, we decided that we should split up. Without the military, we're sitting ducks. The longer we stay here, the higher the chance of Confederate attacking us and absorbing us one by one," DC glanced at Alaska, "It's why I didn't want anyone going out on their own earlier. So, we're going to split into five groups, with each group going to a different country here. When we recover Puerto Rico, we'll meet up and unite to make America."

"That's it? That's all there is to the plan?" Alaska asked, his brows furrowing, "Shouldn't we fight back? We have police and militias, right?"

DC frowned, his frustration revealing itself, "Well, tell me, Alaska, what else can we do?! First of all, police aren't even trained for war and even if we have militia, there's only so much they can do on their own. Our options are limited, and I'd rather not make it easy

for Confederate to get what he wants," DC sighed, "I know how you feel. None of us likes this plan, but we have no way of actually fighting back against Confederate. I know that it's frustrating. I know that it sucks, but it's all we can do right now."

Alaska frowned and looked down at the floor before looking up at DC and smiling weakly, trying to recover the abundant hope he seemed to have when he was up on the roof. He was going to say something hopeful like 'everything will be okay,' but his mouth felt dry, and Alaska realized that he didn't fully believe that sentence anymore. It's so much easier to be hopeful when you can't see the reality of the situation, isn't it? In the end, Alaska didn't say anything. He just opened his mouth and then closed it again a few seconds later, his gaze drifting back to the floor.

DC glanced at Alaska before biting his lip and looking away. DC commented pessimistically, "I'm not sure if it's just me, but I just have this feeling that whatever the future has in store for us, it'll be something along the lines of a nightmare."

A nightmare.

Yes, a nightmare is definitely the right word.

But maybe, at the same time, a nightmare isn't the right word.

Because a nightmare is simply a dream.

And the sounds of screams, the sound of someone clinging desperately onto life only for their fingers to be pried off the edge, isn't a dream.

Puerto Rico looked out the window. It was late at night, and the sky was darkening more than it should've. For tonight, Puerto Rico and Confederate are staying in China's suite. China had accepted Confederate's deal under one condition, after all: that Confederate would absorb a state by sunset tomorrow.

Crack!

The sky seemed to crack in half as lightning struck down from the heavens. In a flash the lightning was gone, replaced by a torrent of

drops that fell down onto the ever-bustling city below. It had been so long since Puerto Rico had seen a storm and, to be honest, he had taken them for granted. After all, you never know how much you miss something until it's gone. Puerto Rico glanced at the dark, foreboding clouds only made visible by the city's bright lights.

How long would the storm last?

How long would any of this last?

No matter. The rain was making Puerto Rico sleepy, so he got up and walked to the bed China had offered him. He laid down on the bed and as soon as his head hit the pillow, he was out like a light.

In his dreams, he was falling. To where, he didn't know. All he knew was that he was going to hit the ground soon.

Very, *very* soon.

Ch 37: All The Way Down \ The Betrayal

It was late at night when everyone decided to go their separate ways. Alaska looked around, feeling his heart weighing down on his chest. Though he could tell everyone was trying to keep themselves together, he also noticed how close to crying some people were. You could only hold a facade for so long until you crack, after all. France looked like she would burst into tears any second now, and Alaska was pretty sure she already had. She was probably going through shock. I mean, who wouldn't? Hearing that your son *might* be gone forever should have that effect on people. Actually, Alaska was surprised at the fact she hadn't broken down already. Or anyone, really. I guess when you're a countryhuman, you become really good at acting and faking emotions.

Alaska knew that he was great at it, anyway. Faking a smile all those years ago really does come handy, doesn't it?

Alaska turned to look at Russia. Somehow, he seemed better than what he was on the roof. Maybe it was the determination to bring America back that kept his fire burning. Or maybe it was the desperate need to have him back, Alaska would never know. He could never really understand romantic love, anyway.

All the states had been split between America's family. It was better this way, after all, Confederate would have to deal with these strong countries to get to the states, and the countries could give economic support to the states whenever they needed it. It was kinda funny, actually. When together, the states made the biggest superpower ever, but, when they were split apart, they seemed to be so much weaker.

Alaska wasn't sure about what that said about them.

Currently, Russia was talking with DC. Alaska scoffed. Russia was staying behind, at the hospital. Originally, he would've played the

same role as America's family, taking in a few states and helping them, but several states, as well as Britain and Kiwi, objected to that. To put it simply, they didn't trust Russia enough. Maybe it was the remnants of the Cold War or something. The states did, however, begrudgingly allow him to stay behind to protect Hawaii and Rhode Island.

Alaska felt a pang in his heart and he bit his lip. Hawaii. The two had been so close... Alaska should've done something, he should've stopped her... Alaska sighed, pushing his self-blame aside. Now wasn't a good time to blame himself for what had happened. But... Alaska also knew he wouldn't be able to forgive himself if he just sat around and did nothing, waiting for everyone else to fix the problem for him.

Walking up to Russia and DC, he butted into their conversation, "Heyyy, DC?"

DC turned to Alaska, sighing, "What happened this time?"

Alaska clicked his tongue, "Well, I've decided I'm gonna stay behind with Russia to look after Hawaii."

DC's face became confused, then sympathetic, then sad. He sighed, "I can understand why... but no. We can't take any risks. We both know the first place Confederate will return to is the hospital. We can't afford you being there. I'm sorry, Alaska, I really am, but this is for the best."

Alaska clenched his hands into fists, feeling them shake, "I... I wasn't asking, DC."

DC's brows furrowed, "*What?*"

Alaska looked straight into DC's eyes, plainly showing his determination in his eyes, "I wasn't asking. I'm staying here whether you like it or not- I can handle myself. Also, Russia will be there. We'll be fine. Please..."

DC's brows furrowed slightly in disbelief before he pursed his lips and yelled out, "No! We can't risk it! You just don't seem to

understand it, do you?! You aren't just looking after yourself anymore, you're looking after all of us! If Confederate gets you, there's almost no chance we'll ever see America again. America will be gone forever, just like what Confederate wants!" Alaska felt pity fill his heart as he saw tears form in DC's eyes, "I can't lose the only parent I've ever had!"

Alaska pursed his lips. He knew it was reckless. He knew it was selfish. He knew it was stupid, and that he was stupid for ever considering it, but... he had to help. He had to help his siblings. It's what Dad would've wanted, after all...

Alaska frowned, "But would he risk his two kids to save himself?" Alaska sighed, looking to the side, "Stop acting like it's our end- our demise- because it really isn't. At any moment, we could've merged under a new mind, but we didn't and we still won't. The truth is, we're all idiots, and we just want Dad back. But would Dad want us to risk ourselves for his sake?" Alaska gently shook his head. "No... no, he goddamn wouldn't. But we're all childish and clingy, and we refuse to let go," Alaska softly chuckled to himself. "We really are a messed-up group of kids, aren't we?"

Alaska frowned once again, looking straight at DC, who had a betrayed look on his face that made Alaska feel worse about himself, "If, in theory, Confederate does get me, then all of you better stop being wusses and merge under a new mind. Whether you choose DC or Cali or Texas to lead all of you or, heck, simply create a whole new consciousness... it really doesn't matter. Just stop being cowards and fight back for *once* in your lives.

"We can't rely on Dad for everything, you know? For once in our lives, we need to be the ones who act, not him," Alaska looked around at his siblings, sighing, "because if we don't act- if we're too afraid to take risks, we'll never get Dad back. We'll never get Puerto Rico, someone *we* wronged, back."

Alaska looked around at his siblings before sighing, "There's nothing you can do to change my mind, I'm staying, and I *am* going to protect our siblings. I'm going to get Puerto Rico back before it's too late."

With that, he whipped around, heading into the hospital and towards Hawaii and Rhode Island.

--x--

8 am.

That's a pretty reasonable time for kidnapping, right? Puerto Rico sighed, glancing down the hallway before letting his eyes drift back to who was in front of him, his partner, Confederate.

"So how are we gonna do this?" Puerto Rico asked.

Confederate, who was looking upwards for some reason, said simply, "We get in there, sneak by the dumb human workers, I absorb Hawaii and Rhode Island, and we skedaddle."

Puerto Rico scoffed, "Yeah, right, it won't be that easy."

Confederate rolled his eyes, "Well, what other plans can be made? The room is on the second floor, and I don't know about you, but it's kinda hard to break into the second floor of the building without, you know, *a ladder*."

"What if a country or a state is in the room with them?"

"Doubt it," Confederate started, "I'm pretty sure they're more concerned about themselves right now."

Now it was Puerto Rico's turn to become irritated, "Sure, but you can't read their minds, there's no guarantee!"

Confederate paused, staring icily cold at Puerto Rico, "If I had only acted on guarantees during the Civil War, then I would've been stomped out much sooner. If you don't take risks and act without surety, you'll never win anything," Confederate started walking towards the hospital, "Come on, let's go before the sun rises any further."

After successfully sneaking and acting their way past the hospital staff, Confederate and Puerto Rico found themselves in front of Hawaii and Rhode Island's room. Puerto Rico would be lying if he

said that doing this didn't make him guilty or sad, because it did. He knew that he shouldn't, but he still cared for the "family" he once thought was real.

Confederate turned to Puerto Rico, murmuring, "Ok, I'm going to go in there and absorb the states. If I come out in less than 20 seconds, run, and if I'm in there for more than 30 seconds, assume I'm dead and then run."

Puerto Rico hesitantly nodded, and Confederate opened the door, only for him to go pale, slam the door, and say, "Well shit, they really did leave a country behind to guard those two."

"I knew it!" Puerto Rico exclaimed victoriously.

Confederate yelled, "Shut up! Run, we're switching to plan B!"

"We had a plan B?" Puerto Rico yelled, quickly running after Confederate as they raced down the stairs to get back onto the first floor.

"We do now!" Confederate yelled back, proceeding to race straight out of the hospital and into a nearby building. When they got inside, Puerto Rico saw Russia run out of the hospital and he jumped, his eyes widening in fear, "Holy shoot! Why did they leave the strongest country behind?!"

Confederate growled, "Don't ask me!" He ran into the stairwell, Puerto Rico following close behind, running even faster due to the fact he now knew it was Russia, of all countries, who was chasing them.

Realizing that they had just run into a stairwell of all places and were now running up the steps, Puerto Rico felt himself become confused and he yelled in alarm, "Why the fuck are we going up?!"

Confederate became visibly aggravated, yelling back, "We'll jump onto the hospital roof, this building is one floor higher!"

"And you know this *how?!* Also, do you have some sort of deathwish?! You do realize that that means that this building is 16

floors high, right?! People die from that sort of fall!"

Confederate's right eye twitched and he ran faster through his increasing yet unnatural rage, "I saw the difference in heights earlier when we were outside of the hospital, and they aren't that far apart! Also, for your information, I do not have a deathwish, but it seems like *you do, getting on my nerves at a time like this!"*

Puerto Rico felt confusion and fear shoot through him and he slowed down the slightest bit, his voice getting quieter, "What does *that* mean?"

But, much to Puerto Rico's distress, Confederate didn't respond. He felt his heart drop. What was Confederate getting on about? Puerto Rico suddenly got a bad feeling from this all and got the sudden urge to turn around and run away. He probably would've done just that if not for the thumping of feet racing up the stairs several floors down.

He couldn't turn back now.

Gulping and pushing his fears away- Confederate was his ally, after all. He was probably just making a bad joke, right...? Puerto Rico ran after Confederate, his adrenaline and fear pushing him on as they hurriedly raced up all 16 floors.

When they reached the top of the stairs, Confederate kicked down the iron that led to the roof, watching it as it loudly screeched open. As they walked out onto the roof, Puerto Rico felt burnt out, and his legs felt like jelly. He was panting, and it was obvious Confederate was, too.

Confederate eyed the gap between their building and the hospital real quick before backing up a bit. Puerto Rico watched him carefully, tired and huffing. This was nuts. Confederate wouldn't make it. Suddenly, Confederate eyes glowed a dull red and he sprinted forward, almost as though new energy burst into life inside of him. Reaching the end of the building, he jumped off, expertly landing on the hospital roof with a roll no regular person could pull off. Puerto Rico simply watched Confederate in shock. There was no way, Puerto Rico could never do something like that, especially not

at this height. If Puerto Rico jumped short, he could die.

Confederate turned around, yelling, "See, it's possible! Now, get over here before Russia catches up to you!"

Puerto Rico glanced at the gap in front of him, backing up and bit and shaking his head. No... no way, there was no way he'd make it.

Confederate growled, "Get. Over. Here."

Puerto Rico glanced down at him. This was insane. He was insane. But heavy footsteps coming from the stairwell behind him brought a fresh wave of fear into Puerto Rico's entire soul, not to mention the glare Confederate was giving him. Puerto Rico gulped. He didn't really have a choice here, did he? He was cornered on both sides... who knew what would happen if Russia caught up to him? Puerto Rico didn't really want to find out. He was a traitor, the one who helped kill America. There was no doubt in Puerto Rico's mind that Russia would love to kill Puerto Rico back.

He had no choice.

He had to jump.

Puerto Rico's heart rate spiked, and he felt himself breathe heavier in fear. Gulping, Puerto Rico started running forward, trying to remember what Confederate did. He ran and ran, shoving down the fear that threatened to paralyze his limbs and doom him to an untimely end. Upon reaching the end of the building, Puerto Rico jumped off as hard as he could just like Confederate had, his heart hammering in his chest louder than it ever had before.

Puerto Rico felt fear consume him as he started falling down towards the ground. Forcing his eyes away from the ground and to the roof of the hospital, Puerto Rico realized a fatal flaw: he didn't have the energy Confederate had...

And he was just the slightest bit short of the roof.

Feeling his heart jump straight into his throat with fear, Puerto Rico reached as far as he could forward. This was it, this was it, he was a goddamn fucking idiot. This was how it would all end. And he

would never, ever find the family he's been searching for for all of his miserable, pathetic, tear-filled years.

But like a miracle that could never be spoken with words, Puerto Rico felt the palm of his hands hit the side of the roof, and Puerto Rico immediately held on for dear life. He felt the force of an invisible blow hit him as the momentum of him falling came to a grounding halt. At this point, he was barely hanging onto the hospital roof with his hands; but, nevertheless, he had made it. He had made it...

Holy shit, he had made it!

Despite the fact he had literally almost died, laughter, probably from the exhilaration and adrenaline of it all, bubbled out of his chest. He had made it! Sure, he was barely hanging on with his hands, but Confederate would help him up. They had a job to do, after all. Still feeling adrenaline course through his veins, Puerto Rico yelled out, "Confederate! Help me up!"

Confederate came closer, his face finally coming into view due to Puerto Rico's horrible angle due to, you know, dangling off of a freaking building.

Puerto Rico stared up at Confederate in confusion. What was he doing? Why was he waiting? Confederate needed to pull him up and they needed to skedaddle, quickly, before Russia showed up!

But when Confederate's irises once again started glowing a dull red shade and Confederate himself still didn't do anything, only staring down weirdly at Puerto Rico, Puerto Rico couldn't help but start to feel uneasy. What was going on? What was with Confederate's expression? Why was Puerto Rico starting to get this sinking feeling in his gut...?

Puerto Rico nervously sputtered out, "C-Confederate? Come on, what are you doing? H-help me up!"

Suddenly, a wave of realization showed itself onto Confederate's face, somehow only serving to make Puerto Rico even more terrified, his knuckles growing white from gripping onto the roof so

hard. Puerto Rico felt his arms growing tired, too. This wasn't good... what the heck was wrong with Confederate? *What was going on?* "C-Confederate...?"

Out of nowhere, Confederate burst out into a fit of loud, crazy laughter, sending a wave of fear and unexplainable horror crashing down onto Puerto Rico, "I understand it now!" Confederate yelled out, looking down at Puerto Rico menacingly, "Gosh, it was so obvious, why didn't I see it sooner?! *It* was giving me the biggest clues ever! Man, my wit really *has* dulled with time!"

Puerto Rico felt a pit form in his stomach and he immediately scrabbled for some sort of purchase with his feet. He needed to get up onto the roof, *now*. He didn't know what the heck Confederate was talking about, but he- sure as heck- didn't want to figure it out for himself. He didn't like where any of this was going. No, he was *terrified* of where this was going. But despite trying desperately to scrabble upwards with his feet, he consistently failed to find purchase.

Confederate grinned widely. A menacing, terrifying, evil grin that spoke more than any words could, "Surely you haven't forgotten, right? It was raining almost all night, and it's early in the morning. Everything is still a little bit slick with the overnight rain, isn't it, Puerto Rico?"

Puerto Rico's eyes widened, "Please, Confederate-"

The loud screech of a steel door opening sounded behind Puerto Rico and Confederate looked up at the source of the sound like a hungry predator that was just about to eat its prey.

Puerto Rico's mouth went dry. He shouldn't have jumped, he shouldn't have jumped- "Confederate, please, stop- stop joking around and help me up!" Puerto Rico desperately cried out, letting out a small, desperate laugh. Why did he laugh? This wasn't funny. This was terrifying, and Puerto Rico wanted *out*.

Confederate, however, ignored Puerto Rico's desperate cry, smirking up at the building Puerto Rico had just jumped off of. He smirked cruelly and said, "Why hello, Russia. I have a question for you...

have the states told you about how America split yet?"

Utter and horrified Silence.

Confederate smirked like a wild animal, laughing happily like the disgusting monster he was, "Well then, you do!" Confederate lifted up his right foot, his eyes narrowing while his smirk only seemed to grow, "I recommend that you tell America your last goodbyes, then."

"You bitch!" A furious voice yelled out.

But, the minute Puerto Rico heard Russia's voice, Confederate slammed his foot down onto Puerto Rico's left hand. Puerto Rico screamed in pain and agony, and his left hand quickly lost its grip on the roof. Puerto Rico already felt tears streaming down his face. He could barely feel his hand other than the horrid pain coursing throughout it. Confederate chuckled, his eyes glowing dully. How was any of this funny to him?!

"No, no, you can't cry yet, Puerto Rico, that runs all the fun," Confederate smirked.

Puerto Rico heard himself begging, "Confederate, please-! What did I do wrong?! Please, stop-!"

Puerto Rico once again screamed in utter agony as Confederate stomped down as hard as he could onto Puerto Rico's right hand. Despite the agonizing, blood-curdling scream, however, Confederate continued to push down harder onto Puerto Rico's hand, finding sickening delight in Puerto Rico's cries and yells of pain.

As Confederate continued to push down even harder, Puerto Rico could've sworn he heard the cracking and crunching of his bones, despite his loud screams of agony.

Confederate, with a sickening smile, leaned down just the slightest bit to get a better look of Puerto Rico's tear-stained face. Smiling even wider, Confederate muttered to Puerto Rico and Puerto Rico only, "Say hi to America for me, will ya?"

And with that simple request, Confederate lifted his foot off of

Puerto Rico's hand, watching with unnatural satisfaction as the almost-unconscious Puerto Rico fell

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Confederate grinned like a cat in the horrified silence that followed, staring down at the bloody mess below, "How did that old saying go? United we stand, divided we fall?" Confederate chuckled to himself.

"Well, Puerto Rico really did *fall*,"

Confederate looked up at Russia menacingly, his monstrous grin only growing wider with every passing second.

"Didn't he?"

Chapter 38: Pool of Red \ The Nightmare That Came True

Russia barged through the rooftop door, almost breaking it down with his anger. He whipped around, not seeing Confederate or Puerto Rico. Confusion started to creep into his mind until he heard a voice echo around him.

"Confederate, please, stop- stop joking around and help me up!"

Russia immediately turned to the source of the sound, walking up near the edge of the building. Underneath him, on the roof of the hospital, was Puerto Rico and Confederate. Confederate was looming menacingly over Puerto Rico looking directly at Russia while Puerto Rico clung onto the building for dear life, fear defining his features. What? Weren't they allies? Why did Confederate have that... look on his face?

Russia felt a silent fear creep into him as Confederate bore his eyes into Russia's. Russia knew that Confederate was essentially powerless against him, but something about this situation sent the creeps down Russia's spine.

Before Russia could think too deeply about all of this, however, Confederate's lips twisted upwards in a smirk, "Why hello, Russia. I have a question for you... have the states told you about how America split yet?"

Russia inwardly flinched. They had... but how would Confederate know about that? Russia's eyes drifted to the terrified Puerto Rico. Surely... Puerto Rico didn't tell him, did he? But why? That would practically guarantee his own doom! Or, at least, that's what the states had said. But Confederate wouldn't really kill his ally for something as petty as that, right?

Confederate smirked wildly, a burst of laughter erupting from his chest. Russia kinda thought it sounded like a hyena's laugh.

Confederate spoke, "Well then, you do!" Confederate lifted up his right foot, his eyes narrowing and his grin widening, "I recommend that you tell America your last goodbyes, then."

Realization hit Russia like a truck and anger overwhelmed him. Holy shit, was Confederate really going to kill his only ally?! In an instant, Russia's doubt transformed itself into anger, and Russia clenched his fists. No human could survive a fall from this height and Russia wasn't even sure if countryhumans could, either. As much as he didn't like Puerto Rico right now, if Puerto Rico died, Russia would never get America back.

And he couldn't let that happen.

A soft growl escaped his lips as he yelled out in anger, taking a few steps back and preparing to jump onto the hospital roof, "You bitch!"

As soon as he said that, however, Confederate slammed his foot down on Puerto Rico's left hand. Russia felt himself falter as Puerto Rico cried out in pure agony and his left hand lost its grip on the roof. Steeling his nerves and rekindling his anger, Russia took a few more steps back, trying to eye the best point in which he could run across and jump to Confederate without risking the chance of being in the same pickle as Puerto Rico. He had to be careful about this, running in blindly will only risk himself.

But was risking himself worth it to save America?

No... No... that was the wrong question to ask. In this situation, there's no way that Puerto Rico will be able to get away on his own. Especially not with that squashed hand. If Russia's going to jump across, he needed to do it when Confederate was distracted. As Russia was thinking through all of this, Confederate chuckled, his eyes started to glow a dull red. With a smirk, he spoke, "No, no, you can't cry yet, Puerto Rico, that ruins all the fun."

Russia glared at Confederate while Puerto Rico, in a terrified panic, begged, "Confederate, please-! What did I do wrong?! Please, stop-!"

While Puerto Rico said that, Russia's thoughts flew around at light

speed. What would Russia even do when he jumped? He would land, sure, but after that? There would be a small interval of time where he'd have to recover from falling. Though it's a small interval, sure, it's still plenty of time for Confederate to kill Puerto Rico. All he would have to do would stomp on Puerto Rico's right hand, and Puerto Rico would be as good as dead. Russia growled. What could he do?! He felt like every option he might choose had an ending where Confederate won. That no matter what he did, this all played into Confederate's hand. Did Confederate really think this far ahead? Was this his plan the entire time?! To lure Russia out, essentially kill America while Russia could do nothing, and then head for the three states still in the hospital?!

No! No, there had to be a way! He needed to see America again, he needed to tell him that he loved him back-

Russia was harshly pulled out of his thoughts as Puerto Rico screamed again in utter agony. Confederate had stomped on Puerto Rico's right hand and, despite Puerto Rico's deafening cries, Russia could faintly hear the sounds of bones in Puerto Rico's hand crunching. Horror and nausea started plainly showing itself on Russia's face. Russia could only guess how much pain Puerto Rico was in right now. Hopelessness and vague anger started clouding Russia's judgement. Why didn't he act sooner?! The minute Confederate lifted his foot up, Puerto Rico would careen towards the ground.

A saccharine smile appeared on Confederate's face as he leaned down and murmured so that only Puerto Rico, who was starting to go limp, could hear. When he was done speaking, he lifted his foot up, and Russia could only watch in horror as Puerto Rico fell limply towards the ground.

Upon hitting the ground, a splatter of dark red blood painted the ground beneath Puerto Rico, and a horrid thud echoed its way up to Russia, making him flinch. If Russia was any closer, he would've been able to notice the pool of blood that started to cover the ground in a thick layer beneath Puerto Rico's skull.

Russia felt horror chill his veins as Confederate grinned at the horrible sight before them, "How did that old saying go? United we

stand, divided we fall?" A menacing chuckle escaped Confederate's lips as his eyes moved up to meet Russia's once again, "Well, Puerto Rico really did fall, didn't he?"

Russia clenched his teeth and balled his fists, a sense of horror, anger, and revenge growing inside of him. Before he could yell out anything, however, Confederate stepped back from the edge and spoke in a chilling tone, "Now you have a choice," He pointed at himself. "You can choose to take the time to try and beat me to death, or," He gestured down at Puerto Rico, "you can desperately try to save someone who can bring your darling America back," Confederate glanced back down at Puerto Rico's bloody mess of a body, chuckling darkly. "But, I'm not sure you can save him even if you try," Confederate grinned, turning around and walking towards the hospital's rooftop door.

Russia could only watch him walk away, feeling desperation drown out any rational thinking he had.

He needed to save America.

Even so, Confederate was heading straight for Alaska. If Russia didn't do anything about that, he'd have to risk losing Alaska, too. Russia felt his eyes drift back to Puerto Rico's body and felt his heart drop again. In reality, he didn't have a choice here, did he?

If Puerto Rico wasn't dead already, then he was dying, and America along with him. All Russia could do was try to save Puerto Rico and hope that Alaska was smart enough to run away the minute he saw Confederate.

Russia, feeling absolutely horrible about himself, turned around, racing through the door and down the stairs.

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Alaska stood ready in some sort of fighting pose. If he was being honest with himself, he knew how to hunt animals, not fight people, but he had seen enough of Cali's movies to at least know a few fighting poses and moves. Thank you, Jackie Chan.

Around fifteen minutes ago (or at least it felt like fifteen minutes to Alaska), Russia had woken Alaska up, telling him that Confederate was here. After waking Alaska up, he had chased after them. Alaska could've followed him, sure, but he stayed here to protect Hawaii and Rhode Island, not try to kill Confederate or anything like that. Sure, Confederate dying would be pretty nice, but that was not Alaska's main goal.

Seeing the door open, he tensed up, preparing himself for a fight. As expected, Alaska saw none other than Confederate at the door. Upon seeing Alaska, Confederate tensed in surprise, only for a cool expression to envelop his features a moment later. His lips cruelly twisted upwards, and Alaska bristled.

"Well, do you look at that..." Confederate chuckled, "Now, my expectations for you guys were low, but not *this* low."

Alaska snarled, but chose not to give Confederate the satisfaction of a response, instead glaring at him and tensing up in preparation for a scuffle.

Confederate grinned, and his red eyes seemed to glow in the light. After what felt like a split second, he lunged forward, his fist ready to crash into Alaska's throat. Alaska immediately jerked into action, his arms flying up to block the punch. Despite the successful block, however, Alaska felt a hot red spike of pain shoot through him and he crumpled in pain.

With a cruel grin, Confederate reached down towards Alaska, grabbing him by the throat and lifting him up with surprising strength. Alaska choked as Confederate's grip on his neck tightened. Finding himself unable to breathe, Alaska let out a choking sound, scrabbling at the hands on his neck and scratching them up. Despite this, however, Confederate's grip never loosened. As to how Confederate kept his grip the same despite all of Alaska's scratching and struggling, Alaska had no idea. In fact, Confederate seemed to be having the time of his life, his expression one of joy as his irises glowed an unnatural red.

Alaska felt fear jolt through him as he looked into their crimson depths. Confederate looked like a monster... No, he *was* a monster...

...A nightmare someone tried desperately to forget.

Confederate started to speak in a low, dangerous tone, "I really do wonder, is America conscious somewhere in there?" His grin grew, "If so, I want him to watch while I kill another one of his own."

After he said that, Confederate's grip tightened on Alaska's neck and Alaska let out a choking sound as he desperately tried to suck in air. Alaska saw his vision start to fray to black at its edges as he desperately tried to pry Confederate's hands off of his neck. At this rate, he was going to go unconscious.

Suddenly, Confederate's grip on Alaska loosened and Alaska dropped to the floor, his vision still frayed with black as he desperately gasped for air, almost choking on the large breaths he took in. Even Confederate seemed surprised by his own actions, confusedly looking at his hand while his irises ceased to glow. Then Confederate's expression hardened and he turned towards Rhode Island, Alaska still desperately gasping in air.

With a determined expression, Confederate stalked up to Rhode Island and put his hand on her shoulder. Upon physical contact, Rhode Island's body glowed white and, in instants, she was gone. In that split instant, America's body- controlled by Confederate- reacted the only way a countryhuman's could: it started shrinking in height. No doubt it was adjusting to finally having territory again. Curling and uncurling his fingers, Confederate confidently grinned with the addition of his new land, turning to Hawaii.

Alaska felt fear jolt down him. No, no, no, he had to save Hawaii. He needed to stop Confederate. Alaska, despite still lacking proper air, tried to push himself onto his feet, barely able to stand up for a few meager seconds before staggering backwards into the wall. Confederate only smirked at Alaska's struggles- and Alaska glared back- before touching Hawaii's shoulder. In a split second, Hawaii glowed a bright white, and she was gone.

Alaska felt his heart drop, and whatever angry expression he had on his face disappeared.

No, no...

He failed.

He failed everyone.

Confederate then turned to Alaska, who froze with fear. Feeling tears come to his eyes, Alaska realized there was only one thing left to do.

He needed to run.

At that moment, Alaska's memory flickered back to when Confederate was choking, specifically Confederate's glowing eyes as he practically choked Alaska to death. Whoever Confederate was- no, *whatever* Confederate was, he was no longer fully human. He had *enjoyed* watching Alaska's pain and instead of absorbing him, Confederate tried to kill him, probably just for fun. None of them would be able to defeat this monster alone. In the end, he couldn't do anything for Hawaii and Rhode Island but... but by running, he can do everything he can to bring Dad back. Because... None of them can make Confederate pay for this on their own. None of them had beaten Confederate before...

But Dad had, and Alaska knew that he could do it again.

Pushing himself off of the wall, Alaska felt adrenaline course through his veins as he raced out of the room, down the hallway, and down the stairs of the hospital. He heard some people yell at him for running, but he didn't care. He just needed to run- run fast, run faster than he ever had before. Alaska couldn't tell if Confederate was following him, but just the thought of him chasing behind Alaska pushed him to run even faster.

Racing out of the hospital, he raced across the street, somehow successfully dodging the traffic. Free from the street, he ducked into an alleyway, trying to choose the most confusing route through the twists and turns of the alleyways. And even when his legs got tired, he kept on running. He had to keep going, he couldn't stop.

Once Alaska was sure that he had run far enough, he slowed down to a stop, daring to look behind him and listen for footsteps racing after him. Luckily enough, Alaska heard nothing, which meant that

no one had followed him. Alaska let out a breath of relief and fell to the floor, his legs shaking violently as he gasped for air. Alaska foreignly touched his neck and winced. There was definitely going to be a bruise there later... How hard did Confederate squeeze his neck? Where did Confederate even get that strength from in the first place?

Alaska shook his head, his hand shaking as it fell to his side. What would have happened to him if he didn't run? Alaska shook in fear. If he was being honest with himself, part of the reason why he even ran in the first place was pure fear. Alaska's thoughts drifted back to Confederate's terrifying, glowing eyes and almost shook in fear once again. That was what almost dying felt like? That fear, that hopelessness, that horror... he would never wish it upon anyone.

Actually, no, he'd wish it upon Confederate, but that's not the point.

Alaska hugged himself. There was a point in time where he yearned for death but... but Alaska doesn't like thinking about back then. It may be dumb but... now that he's told Russia his story, he never wanted to think about the past again. He just didn't want to think about the past's horrors, sorrow, and pain anymore. Alaska sighed, now he was just going off track.

Looking around him, Alaska pursed his lips. He had no idea where he was, but he would deal with that later.

Alaska started shaking with soundless sobs, his mind wandering back to Hawaii and Rhode Island. With his right hand, he wiped away the beginnings of tears.

He would deal with that later.

Chapter 39: Distancing \ The Look In His Eyes

China was looking out the window and sipping some tea when he heard a knock at his door. Setting down his tea, he turned and called for whoever it was to come in. What China didn't expect was for Confederate to come in. Especially not a really short Confederate. Earlier, they were practically equal in height, but now Confederate was a solid 60 centimeters shorter. China gave him a sideways grin, "Well look at you, did you lose territory instead of gaining territory?"

Confederate didn't look all too pleased with that comment, "No, this body just finally adjusted to having territory again. I absorbed a state like you asked. Two, actually."

China hummed, trying to look behind Confederate to see his short companion with a flag similar to Cuba's. That one was short, too. China became a little confused when he didn't come in, "Where's your partner? You know, the Cuba lookalike?"

With an emotionless face, Confederate answered simply, "He got in my way, so I killed him."

If China was still sipping on his tea, he would've choked on it. China felt surprise and maybe even disgust flow through him. Sure, China himself is a bad person, too, but he wouldn't straight-up kill his allies the moment they got in the way. Keeping his cool, China asked, "How did he get in your way, exactly?"

"That's simple, I discovered that he was the final piece they needed to form America, so I killed him so they couldn't form America."

China felt a sudden feeling of unease prick through him. He asked, "You use Brit's method, right?"

Confederate nodded, "I assume so, it was the only method America

knew, thus it is the only method I know."

"Didn't you die in the 17th century? How do you have a physical body?"

"Stole it from America."

China felt his mind try to solve what had happened on his own. It just didn't make sense. Confederate was probably taking advantage of the ol' Brit's system by using America's body as a loophole- some biological reason China never really cared to learn. He never really liked biology, anyway. But if Puerto Rico didn't want to merge with the other states or whatever they were called, then it wouldn't have happened. Especially if they all use Brit's methods. To put it simply, Confederate didn't need to kill Puerto Rico.

He had killed an ally for no real reason other than he possibly wanted to.

China immediately frowned. His decision to help Confederate was already risky as it was- it could possibly antagonize all of America. It's not like China didn't trust his wiring capabilities, but it was still a potential risk. But China wasn't so sure he wanted to help Confederate anymore. If China was good at anything, he was great at observing and reading others while not letting them read him. Puerto Rico looked like... Well, he seemed like some sort of lost, angry kid. It looked like he didn't really know what he was doing with himself and like he never really had a place where he felt like he truly belonged. Maybe he did, once, but he probably lost it or it got destroyed. Not to mention, he didn't seem too confident with himself and probably relied on others to make the decisions he didn't have the confidence to make. Also, he seemed to put emotions over his own rational thinking. China figured out all that in the span of an afternoon and an evening. Puerto Rico was *very* easy to read. China seriously doubted that Puerto Rico would've betrayed Confederate all that quickly based on what he saw. China could be wrong, but he usually isn't.

China glanced at Confederate, quickly realizing what he had to do.

Confederate was different from Puerto Rico, starkly so. There was a

curious look in his eyes that China was previously interested in, but now, with this new knowledge, China finally comprehended the severity of that look. He had to distance himself as quickly as possible and give on the front he was never Confederate's ally to begin with. The ground around Confederate was getting too unstable, and China would rather not be around when it crumbled.

"So, when is our deal coming into effect?" Confederate asked, an impatient tone in his voice.

Putting on an act, China laughed, his eyes glaring menacingly at Confederate, "Wait," he laughed again for show, "Give me a second, you actually thought I was being serious earlier?"

Confederate became confused, but before he could ask any questions, China continued, "You did, didn't you? Ha! Now that's rich."

Confederate's expression became steely, anger clear on his face, "What are you saying?"

China grinned, sitting down, "Let me explain this to you in words you can understand. Why would *I* help *you*?" China laughed to himself, "Can you answer me that, American pig?"

Confederate clamped his mouth shut in rage. Did he just get played for a fool?! China looked serious to him earlier but... I guess Confederate was wrong. Confederate's eyes became slits, contempt growing inside of him. Did China never really take him seriously? Was he just a simple toy for him to play around with?!

China grinned like a cat, knowing he had to keep up the act until Confederate left, "You can't? Then let me give you the answer: I have no reason to help you."

China stood up, continuing with his speech, "You claim to replace America and become his successor: different countryhuman, same country, yes? Well, no matter how many times I mull it over in my head, the risk is too great, and I'll tell you how." China coolly glanced at Confederate, suddenly thankful for his own rough upbringing. When you are practically raised in what seems to be

endless wartime, putting on a mask of a face becomes quite easy. China started to pace around, not liking being so still, "Despite your century or so of planning- that's around how long you've been gone from this plane, correct?" Not giving Confederate time to answer, China continued, "Despite your century or so of planning, you don't have any allies willing to help you. Allies... allies with supplies and money and personnel, that's what you need. In your mind, you're playing a game of chess, and yet you're missing a handful of pieces: a knight there, a bishop there, and so on. A master at chess would not need those pieces to win anyway, but you are an amateur at best. An amateur who needs allies that can lend him the pieces he's missing."

Confederate followed China with his eyes, not quite sure where this was going. He really wanted to leave- if China wasn't going to help him, this was a waste of time- but he also got this feeling that whatever China says might be helpful. Might.

"Confederate, did you never once think that everyone else is playing an elaborate game of chess, too? Who we're playing against is beyond me. Maybe it's against fate, against death, against another country..." China glanced back at Confederate, "or maybe... even against God." China shrugged, "Then again, I don't really believe such an entity exists. If God does exist, then he sure doesn't give a fuck about us."

Confederate narrowed his eyes just a little, feeling the churning rage inside of him get a little angrier.

Confederate didn't like atheists.

I suppose he would have to get used to them, though, as well as the other oddities he's seen so far in this modern world.

"But, unfortunately for you, I'm smart enough to recognize the dangers of my opponents..." *and my allies.* China continued in thought. China would've said the last bit, but Confederate seemed mad enough as is, and China didn't exactly want to wait and see how long it would take for him to snap.

Something told China that it wouldn't be pretty.

China turned back to face Confederate, halting his pacing with a seemingly sad smile on his face, "I'll give you a scrap of advice, however. You see, you've looked through a keyhole for so long that now that the door's finally unlocked, you don't dare to open the door. You keep on seeing the world through America's eyes. America, to put it simply, is a lucky man. He still has a pretty important spot in his own government. A voteless spot, yes, but at least he can affect things to a degree. Most of the countryhumans in the world are..." China waved his hand around as if he were looking for the right word, "Fancy showpieces for governments to show off and use as some sort of diplomacy token. Back in your day, we were more important and had more meaning than just a fancy item on display, but things have changed. We butter up our enemies and allies and whatever," China hummed to himself, realizing something, "Hm, then maybe America and Russia are doing amazing jobs, getting all chummy like that. Huh, never really thought of it like that... Either way, the most I have is influence and bags of money, and I'm afraid that isn't enough for the people you're trying to challenge and win against here," China lied. Although it's true many countryhumans don't have any role in their own government- take the Nordics for example- China still did. He just needed a convincing lie to make his excuse make more sense. The more China went into his web of lies and excuses, however, the more he started to realize how good of a choice this was, distancing from Confederate. Even with China's current power and influence, if he got found out while helping Confederate, his climb to supremacy would've been squashed by filthy Europeans.

China almost growled. China will *not* go down like his grandfather. He will reclaim the number one spot his family seemed to have for generations.

Meanwhile, Confederate, who was fuming internally, forced himself to calm down with China's last comment. He had to think logically about this. China had practically just fucked him over, hard, and he hated every second of it. Maybe he really should leave. Maybe Confederate shouldn't have jumped the gun and let *it* kill Puerto Rico. At least then he'd still have an ally. But would Confederate be okay with that? Keeping that sort of risk alive? Confederate wasn't sure.

But that isn't what Confederate should be focusing on. He should be focusing on the danger *it* was starting to present. Confederate frowned. *It* was practically useless, and yet somehow *it's* taking control. How? It shouldn't be possible, and yet Confederate is pretty sure that's what's been happening. I suppose this is what Confederate gets for tampering with things he shouldn't have. Is there a way for him to get rid of *it*? Probably not.

He... no, *it* seems to have vague memories of being warned about this. Maybe Confederate should've looked through more of what *it* remembers, but it's a little too late. This was what Confederate got for tampering with something as dangerous and abstract as *it*.

Was he even still himself? The Confederate everyone knows from the Civil War? His flag has changed... what else? But then again, Confederate never even cast a thought to the fact he may be losing his own identity within all this. His identity had practically *become* revenge against America. But, to give himself credit, it's hard to preserve yourself when you're fading amongst the vast folds of another's mind. Maybe that's why he was able to adapt so easily when he met *it*.

But now he's getting off track.

Confederate looked up at China, showing his irritation blatantly on his face, "Do you have another drawn-out excuse for me, or are you done?

"No, I'll admit I don't have much more reason than that," China answered simply, "To put it simply, even though it's just funding, the risk is way too big if I get found out. You and America should know better than anyone that not many people like it when foreign powers interfere with their own personal politics. It isn't in my best interests to antagonize the American populace so soon.

"Maybe I would've helped you if I had more leeway, but I also get the feeling you just showed up during the wrong time in history. In this day and age, practically no one wants war, which means less allies for you. Now, if I may, I ask that you leave. You being here is a risk as it is," China finished, managing to lace some venom into his voice.

Confederate twitched a little- maybe in anger or maybe due to something else- and his eyes glowed a menacing red. China felt a sense of unfamiliar fear build up in his chest, somehow managing to keep on an intimidating face. After a few seconds of what seemed to be the start of some sort of showdown, Confederate turned heel and left, making his anger painfully clear.

With Confederate gone, China plopped down on the couch behind him with a sigh, "I have to admit, that's the most terrified I've been in a while."

Someone chuckled, saying, "He *is* promising. Maybe you shouldn't have changed your opinion so quickly."

China hummed, asking, "How long were you listening, North?"

"Almost the entire time. I guessed I wouldn't be welcomed very well if I barged in, so I just stayed here, where you two couldn't see me," North Korea responded somewhere behind China. He was in the hallway that led to China's bedroom, an extra bedroom, and the bathroom, leaning against the wall. Much to China's displeasure, he often snuck in to get away from "those annoying capitalists" or whatever other tirade he kept going on. China usually tuned him out. Despite what you may think, China didn't like North Korea or being around him all the time, but kept him around anyway because his government advised him to.

China reached for his tea again, "I will admit Confederate is promising; but at the same time, there's something about him I don't like. I tend to trust my gut on these things."

North crossed his arms, going silent for a few seconds. He then asked, "What about him do you not like?"

China suddenly paused, almost spilling some of his tea as he roughly yanked his teacup upwards. Noticing his own drastic reaction, China forced his movements to become calm and collected once again. After a few more seconds of silence, China said thoughtfully, "I suppose he reminds me of someone I used to know. Someone who doomed himself from the beginning... but..."

"But?"

China continued, "But I don't think that's the reason I denied his alliance."

"Then what was?" North asked, kinda curious himself to what China's answer might be.

"I... I'm not sure you'll understand if I tell you."

North raised an eyebrow, saying, "Tell me anyway."

China sipped on his tea before setting it down, "It was the look in his eyes," A confused expression overtook North's face, but China continued before he could ask anything, "That look in his eyes... It just didn't quite feel human anymore. And... if there truly is something inhuman beneath those eyes of his, I doubt he'll need any outside help in the first place... but I also doubt that he'll respect anyone's lives, including his allies. Not with those eyes."

China grinned slightly, his eyes sparkling with curiosity and... something else, "He could either fail spectacularly or overcome something I've only dreamed of overcoming."

North cast the back of China's head a surprised look before responding saltily, "But that's impossible, he's just the remnants of a revolution from a century ago. He has no funding, no armies, nothing! There's no way he'll win."

"No, no, no... you don't understand, North," China insisted, "His eyes... they weren't normal."

"Yeah, they were black, unstable. Though I can't say I understand the red irises, he's not going to get that far," North commented, still not understanding what China was getting at. Black eyes were a common sign of instability. Everyone knew this.

China sighed, shaking his head lightly, "I don't think he was unstable in the way we're used to."

"What do you mean?"

"Do you... do you remember what I told you about the Mongol Empire? That story I said was passed down in my family for generations?"

North blinked in surprise before suddenly coming to a realization, "You don't think..."

"I do," China answered, finishing North's question in his head.

North's brows furrowed, "But how? What... Who did he merge with, then, do get that look in his eyes? The look you call so 'inhuman?'"

China rubbed his thumb against the porcelain of the teacup, his mind in thought. He frowned, "I don't know, but I don't think it was a who."

"What do you..."

"It may seem like a stretch, but... I don't think whatever he merged with is even a person."

"You're insane," North scoffed, "You can only merge with other countryhumans, everyone knows this."

"Maybe," China said distantly, rubbing his porcelain teacup once again.

Just as everything started to settle into silence, North dared to ask, "Why do you think it's a 'what?'"

China weakly smiled, "Because I finally remember what else that look in his eyes reminds me of."

North cast China a curious glance.

China's smile fell as he looked into the reflective surface of the tea.

"That look in his eyes... it reminds me of a nightmare."

Chapter 40: Never letting go \ The Wrong Thing For The Right Reason

As Russia followed Puerto Rico's stretcher through the hallways, feeling like a ghost, he couldn't help but feel a sad familiarity with this all.

This all reminded him of... what was it? A few days ago? It felt like weeks had passed since then. This all reminded him of when America first collapsed. The memory of the ambulance shifted into Russia's mind, and he slightly bit his lip.

From what Russia had picked up and been told, Puerto Rico had betrayed America... but his death also meant America will never, *ever* come back...

And Russia didn't know what he would do with himself if that ever happened.

It was crazy to think of the past month and a half. Who knew so much could happen in such little time? But now, here Russia was, in love with his ex-enemy and hoping with all his heart that someone he barely knew won't die.

If Russia was being honest with himself, he wasn't sure how Puerto Rico could survive this. By the time Russia had run down all those stairs and reached Puerto Rico, he was surrounded by a thick pool of blood that made Russia's heart drop. The blue on Puerto Rico's flag was barely visible, red splattered over it in a cruel pattern.

Russia's brows furrowed and his lips tightened into a grim, worried expression.

Will he ever be able to see America again?

--x--

Chaos... is the word DC would use to describe this current situation. It was clear to DC that Canada was in over his head if he thought he could control all these states. For some of them, the reality of the situation had only just now crashed on them and they were either crying or completely numb. Others were just as stressed out as DC... and a very select few were just avoiding their screwed up feelings completely by being chaotic. Luckily, Canada's group only had one of those, which, for some odd reason, was Wisconsin. DC was almost sure Michigan would be the one to go crazy in this group but, surprisingly, he was just in the corner, shockingly silent. DC was saddened by the sight.

Anyone who didn't know their family very well would say that they seem awfully normal, but to DC, who was there since practically the very beginning, it was... so incredibly sad. His siblings, who would normally be at each other's throats or generally creating chaos, were either numb, completely silent, or in tears. It was an unfamiliar sight, one DC wasn't entirely sure how to deal with.

They were all confused and scared... and they wanted their Dad back. They wanted their *life* back. Sure, their life before this was crazy and DC could barely stand it, but this eerie silence and just... *everything* made DC's stomach churn with uncertainty and fear.

Canada, who was trying to get Wisconsin to stop wreaking chaos, suddenly paused as his phone started ringing. Canada reached into his pocket, casting Wisconsin a worried glance, before looking at the caller ID. DC turned to look at him, watching as Canada's face became somewhat worried as he accepted the call and held the phone to his ear.

"Hello?" Canada said, a worried tone just barely noticeable in his hushed voice. DC could only watch as Canada's expression became more and more worried, his voice now so hushed that even DC couldn't pick out the words. Wisconsin, however, who must've been close enough to hear, stopped completely, an uncertain and uncharacteristically worried expression all over his face. The room seemed to buzz with worry as every state stared expectantly and worriedly at the two, afraid that their worst fears had come true

and that the worst things had happened.

Canada nodded, his expression worried as his lips formed a grim, afraid frown. DC was holding his breath at this point, his mind racing with all the bad things that might've happened. The phone call was obviously important and obviously bad. Was it about them? Who called? What's happened?

Canada seemed to realize he had only nodded and once again spoke in a hushed tone before ending the call. He nervously looked up at the worried states around him before muttering loud enough for everyone to hear, "We need to head over to the hospital, and quickly."

DC opened his mouth and paused briefly before asking the question everyone wanted an answer to, "What happened?"

Canada looked down at the ground, his expression almost unreadable. There were so many emotions shoved into his expression that DC couldn't name a single one anymore.

"Puerto Rico's in the hospital, and Alaska, Hawaii, and Rhode Island have gone missing," Canada paused before adding, almost apologetically, "They... The doctors think Puerto Rico is going to die."

DC's heart dropped as he almost limply fell backwards into the wall behind him.

Puerto Rico was...

And Alaska, Hawaii, and Rhode Island were...

Sudden hopelessness crashed down onto DC, his mind racing to the worst conclusions, which only served to make him even more hopeless.

No...

It can't end like this...

This can't be how it all ends!

This can't be...

But it was, wasn't it? The ending fate so cruelly spat into all of their faces. This ending DC and his siblings never chose, but will probably have to face. This ending...

This ending DC had hoped would never come true.

--x--

"Do you know where the nearest hospital is?"

The young-looking New Yorker stared at Alaska, her expression questioning and maybe even a little shocked. Alaska didn't blame her, it's not every day you see a countryhuman... or would Alaska be called a statehuman? Eh, whatever.

Alaska needed to get back. The hospital was a point of familiarity and, as much as Alaska didn't want to go back to where... *he* was... Alaska touched his neck gingerly, wondering if marks from Confederate choking him were still there. He wondered why Confederate stopped midway, why he didn't finish the deed and kill him.

Anyway, as much as Alaska didn't want to go back to where Confederate was, he didn't exactly have a choice. He was lost, and New York City was... to put it simply, New York City was not a place he's ever been before. Not to mention, he doesn't know where his siblings are and he can't stay lost forever. Russia's probably still around the hospital somewhere, so if Alaska can find Russia, then Russia can probably lead him to his siblings.

It was an optimistic, stupid hope... but it was the only option Alaska had, really. Maybe if he was smarter he could've figured out something else, but he... wasn't, I guess.

The New Yorker, hesitating a little bit, responded, "There's one down that street, you just go straight, straight, and then left."

Alaska smiled, already hurrying in that direction, "Thank you, miss!"

She waved goodbye, an expression of confused amusement on her face as Alaska ran off.

--x--

DC looked up at the hospital before him, a nervous feeling spread throughout his bones. They ended up being a little bit late, but here they were. DC bit his lip in worry as he followed Canada into the building. He hoped they weren't too late.

Once Puerto Rico's hospital room came into view- or at least the one Canada said was his room- DC felt his heart drop and, unable to stop himself, he started running towards it. The other states in the group jolted in surprise before running after him.

Throwing open the door, DC entered the room, seeing everyone else already there. What surprised him the most, however, was a guilty-looking Alaska awfully close to Puerto Rico's hospital bed.

"Alaska?" DC asked, unable to keep the surprise out of his voice.

Alaska's head whipped around to face DC. He gave a small, unsure wave. His eyes, however, kept darting towards Puerto Rico. Because of this, DC looked at Puerto Rico as well. Upon seeing the sad sight, he looked away, unable to handle the sorrow that shook his heart.

To put it simply, Puerto Rico had seen better days. Both of his hands, a leg, and the top and back of his head were bandaged up. DC didn't have to look too closely to see the blood that lightly stained some of them. Puerto Rico's chest also heaved awkwardly upward, as if his unconscious body was struggling to breathe. He was hooked up to a heart monitor and a few IVs that seemed to only make this all the more grim and sad. Although Puerto Rico had betrayed them, seeing him like that was... it wasn't a nice sight.

The room itself was rather large. From the looks of it, it was meant to host two patients at once, but the bed Puerto Rico wasn't occupying was empty. Thus, all 60 or so of them could squeeze into the room. But then again, a good portion of DC's siblings had absolutely no comprehension of personal space, so several groups were scrunched very close together, giving a lot of extra room to

everyone else.

Russia was in the corner, a guilty look on his face as well.

DC paused, his eyes widening. *Wait a second.* His eyes slowly looked around the room, taking in everyone that was there. When he finished peering around the room, he felt like he could cry as he whispered, "Everyone's here."

Georgia, who was close enough to hear what DC said, smiled and replied, "Yeah, everyone *is* here."

Several other states' eyes widened as well as they looked around the room as well.

Everyone was here.

"Well, fuck me, I guess hope isn't dead," Oklahoma whispered. Before DC knew it, he was laughing. He didn't exactly know why. Maybe it was out of relief or maybe it was due to Oklahoma's stupid comment. DC didn't really know, and he couldn't say he cared, either.

Everyone was here, which meant they could form America again!

It felt like an incredible weight was suddenly lifted off of DC's shoulders. He felt weightless, like he could float into the sky at any moment. DC couldn't remember the last time he had felt so relieved and happy. Now all that was left was-

"It won't work," Someone croaked out. It almost sounded like they were crying when they spoke.

DC paused before turning to the source of the sound. It was the US Virgin Islands, nicknamed Viri by her siblings. Tears streamed down her face, and she tried desperately to wipe them away. With a shaky voice, she said, "It won't work, Puerto Rico hates us," She looked up at DC, her lips trembling downward into a frown, "He won't want to, it won't work."

Gradually, the happy look in everyone's faces disappeared. Everyone looked around at each other, the hope draining from their

eyes. She was right, after all.

It *won't* work.

DC looked down at his feet at the realization. They couldn't merge with Puerto Rico unless he wanted to, and they didn't have any sort of convenient loophole to abuse like Confederate. This can't be... DC's lip trembled with rage and sorrow. They were so close... so, so close and now... Canada's words echoed in DC's head patronizingly. 'Puerto Rico is dying.'

If Puerto Rico was awake, they could convince him into it. But he wasn't. He wasn't awake, because he was dying. If they merged, they could've saved Puerto Rico, too. Now two people will die on the same final breath.

DC's expression twisted into anger. He didn't know what he was angry at yet. Maybe it was the universe, maybe it was Confederate, maybe it was himself, or maybe it was nothing at all. All he knew was the familiar hopelessness that had swamped him earlier and a new, crashing wave of rage.

Fate is cruel, and fate is spiteful. DC should've known.

"Whoever said we needed his agreement?" A rather calm voice spoke.

DC looked up in shock. What? What did that mean? The one who spoke this time was Guam. Guam wasn't much of a speaker and often went under the radar. However, he was insanely close to Hawaii and practically every US territory that wasn't an official state, excluding DC. DC kind of wondered what was going in that head of his. DC's brows furrowed, "What do you mean by that?"

Guam used his thumb to point at Britain, who was also in the room, "We don't have to use his technique for everything. There are other techniques used to merge countryhumans."

DC's eyes widened as he felt a scrap of hope return to him, immediately and desperately latching onto it. Guam was right! There are several different techniques out there! Even so, how much

time did they even have to figure out one that will work for their situation? Guam let his hands fall to his sides and glanced at Puerto Rico. His eyes lingered for a few seconds before he looked over at DC, "When I was still under Spanish occupation, I overheard the Spanish Empire talking to himself about a decade before I got handed over to you guys. He always fantasized about taking over China and, that time I overheard him, he was speaking to himself about a unification technique he himself had managed to overhear in one of the meetings he had with the Qing Dynasty. It was in one of his many paranoid ramblings. At that point in time, his ramblings were common- I honestly don't think he was ever mentally stable after he overthrew and killed his son that one time..." Guam trailed off, suddenly questioning himself on why he was speaking about that. He looked at Puerto Rico once again before his expression hardened in determination. He'll just get straight to the point, "Anyway, the only thing the technique required other than knowing how to do it was an extremely close familial relationship. Basically, you had to share at least one parent for it to work. Though you can resist the technique..." Guam frowned, "I'm guessing you can't resist it if you're unconscious."

Only one parent? DC's eyes flew to Florida, hope returning to him in waves. Everyone else started to become hopeful as well. Puerto Rico and Florida were both sons of the Spanish Empire, they just had different mothers, so that would work. Guam would just have to teach Florida how to do it very, very quickly.

But DC also couldn't ignore the icky feeling that overwhelmed him at the same thought. They were *forcing* Puerto Rico to merge with them. It just... it didn't feel right. It felt *wrong* and *cruel,* which it most definitely was. It was clear to DC that many other states seemed to share his line of thought because they looked visibly uncomfortable at the idea.

Who in the world would create a horrid technique like that?

Actually, how do you even create merging techniques?

Oh, wait, the answers to both of those questions are kind of obvious.

"In my opinion, the technique is underhanded and cruel but..." Guam looked back at DC, a softer look to his face- he must've noticed his sibling's unsure and uncomfortable expressions at the prospect of forcing Puerto Rico to merge with them- as he said, "But it's our only option if we want to save Dad and Puerto Rico, my half-brother."

DC blinked in surprise. Wait, they were siblings? It did make sense now that DC thought about it, but Guam never really talked about himself, so DC simply didn't know before this. Guam did see them all as a family, that was true, but he, at the same time, was kind of like a ghost. It was hard to notice his presence most of the time. DC bit his lip. That was their fault, wasn't it? Similarly, the fact they barely knew anything about him was also their fault.

Their family needed a lot of fixing, and, hopefully, they would be given the chance to fix it in the first place.

DC hesitantly nodded with what Guam said. It was wrong, yeah. It felt unpleasant and wrong and cruel. But if they don't do it, the only thing awaiting Puerto Rico and America was death. DC suddenly remembered something Maryland had asked him a few years back: "Would you rather do something wrong for the right reason or something right for the wrong reason?"

At the time, DC had asked what the purpose of that question was and, after Maryland pestered him about it for the next five minutes, he had answered, "Ok, ok! Calm down! Fine, since I have to choose, then... then I think I'd do the wrong thing for the right reason."

"Really?"

DC had given him an annoyed look, "Yeah, really. Now go bother someone else."

Maryland had chuckled, and DC never really thought about it since then.

But, at that very moment, DC found that his answer was still the same.

"Go ahead, Guam," DC forced out, a vague sense of determination taking control for just that moment. "Let's save them both."

Guam nodded, mouthing 'thank you,' before he turned and hesitantly put his hand on Puerto Rico's shoulder. He closed his eyes and deeply exhaled. For a few incredibly long and tense moments practically buzzing with anticipation nothing happened, but then, Puerto Rico started to glow. Like any normal unification, he disappeared after a few seconds, and the heart rate monitor that was once connected to him beeped awfully loud before someone nearby casually unplugged it.

Guam thanked the person who unplugged it, California, and turned to everyone else. With a small smile, Guam gave them all a thumbs up. DC could practically hear everyone's collective sigh of relief. Out of nowhere, the US Virgin Islands ran up to Guam and tackled him with a great, big hug. He laughed and everyone else, inspired by Viri, ran up to Guam and also tackled him into some sort of weird group hug. Everyone was laughing as they hugged, and some were crying. DC laughed in relief and happiness and joined the group hug as well, being the final one to join it.

Within seconds, they all started to glow. Britain, France, Kiwi, Australia, Canada, and (especially) Russia eagerly and hopefully watched as the glowing mass compacted and compacted into an all-too-familiar figure. Russia numbly walked towards the figure, feeling foreign tears start to form in his eyes and slip down his cheeks.

And, when the states finally stopped glowing, Russia heard as France choked out a happy sob and saw as Britain gently hugged his taller partner, thankful tears slipping down his cheeks. Russia heard as Australia muttered, "I knew you wouldn't be gone for long," and saw as Kiwi jumped in thankful joy. Russia heard as Canada let out a happy sigh of relief and saw as Canada wiped away the beginnings of tears.

When the states finally stopped glowing, Russia ran up to an unconscious America before he could topple down to the ground and wrapped him into a giant bear hug, quickly becoming a crying, sobbing mess. Despite what his tears seemed to say, however,

Russia wasn't sad. No, it was quite the opposite because this was the happiest he had been in months. Russia gripped America like he would never be able to hold him ever again and lowered them both down to the floor, cradling America in his arms.

America was back.

No, *his* America was back.

Russia let out happy another sob as he held America closer to him. He couldn't express how happy and thankful he was. Russia almost couldn't believe that America was here, safe in his arms. His mind flashed back to the last time he held America like this, and the things America had said then.

He smiled slightly and whispered, "I love you, too, America..."

Frankly, Russia didn't care about what he himself had said previously anymore. If this experience had shown him anything, it had shown him just how much he had grown to love this stupid American. To put it simply, Russia didn't want to be just friends. He couldn't stand being just friends anymore. He wanted them to be something... something more than just friends.

But for now, Russia was content with holding America close...

And never letting go of him like that ever again.

Chapter 41: Sorry \\ The Words Finally Tumble Out

Pain, then black.

That's the last thing Puerto Rico could remember.

The last thing that he felt. The last thing he saw.

A spike of unbelievable pain, then black.

But now, here he was, surrounded by white.

Where... was he?

His breathing was uneven. His thoughts scrambled.

He wasn't alone here.

There was another person here.

They weren't supposed to be here.

They're uninvited.

They needed to get *out*.

Despite his vision that constantly seemed to go unfocused, Puerto Rico could've sworn that the other person there was Guam.

This all felt like some sick joke. Like a prank no one asked for. The world giving Puerto Rico a great, big "fuck you."

Puerto Rico messed up. He knew this now.

He never should've gotten involved with Confederate.

He should've left the minute he felt something was up. The minute he learned of Confederate's plan...

But...

Why would he leave when Confederate offered such an amazing solution to his problems?

An extreme, sure, but an extreme that could work.

Especially with that... *thing* wrapped around Confederate's fingers. Or was it the other way around? Puerto Rico was never sure which one was truly in control.

Point is, they were both fearsome. One a monster, and the other a nightmare.

It was a good combination if you ignore their... craziness. It was part of the deal.

Puerto Rico clung to them too fast. He should've jumped ship faster.

But then again, Puerto Rico has a tendency to get too close to the wrong people, doesn't he?

At least this way he won't cling to anyone anymore.

Maybe Confederate had done the right thing, killing Puerto Rico.

Confederate had promised him independence and a family... Now he's independent and his family is all of hell. Seems fitting.

Puerto Rico looked around, his mind strangely empty, filled with a sense of numbness Puerto Rico couldn't explain.

...

...

This had to be some sort of cruel joke.

Around Puerto Rico were the states and territories and...

Oh.

Puerto Rico was face to face with Dad.

America, I mean.

Face to face with yet another person who didn't really care about Puerto Rico.

America seemed frozen in place. Rico had a strong urge to run. To where, he had no idea. Just... run. America looked helplessly, almost confusedly, at Puerto Rico, and Puerto Rico's expression seemed to harden.

Since he was dead, he might as well let out his frustrations, right?

Plus... he kinda felt bad.

He didn't want America to *die*, he just...

He really was Confederate's obedient little sheep, wasn't he?

Well, not anymore.

Confederate really did give him independence. Independence from everything, including life.

Well, might as well ask a figment of his imagination the one question he forever wanted to ask.

"Did... Did you ever really care?"

The words felt like dirt in Puerto Rico's mouth, but he couldn't say he cared anymore. He was sick of it. He was sick of being betrayed time and time again. He was sick of being the little lamb, ripe for the slaughter. He was sick of it, sick of it all.

All he ever wanted was a family, a family that cared for him. A family that cared for him just like his mother once did.

A family that saw him as something more than a "Rich Port."

And the words kept coming out.

"I... For the longest time, I idolized you for freeing me from my father. I was willing to forgive your mistakes. I was willing to

forgive you time and time again. I felt let down but... at least you didn't hurt me like Spain did, right? But then a catastrophe happened. I *needed* you, and yet you never came."

Puerto Rico's eyes flickered down to the floor, his thoughts, still scrambled like eggs, trying to wrap around themselves, trying to wrap around Puerto Rico's previous actions and reflect on them. Reflect on if this was the right way to go. The correct path to take.

"Maybe I *did* overreact back then. Maybe I should've heard what you had to say but... I didn't want to hear your reasoning. I still don't. I don't want to hear your excuses, because they will never excuse the fact you weren't there for me when I needed you."

Like tumbleweeds in the great plains, the words kept tumbling out.

They tumbled out and collected, forming frustrated words and sentences. Or maybe the sentences were sad, not frustrated.

Puerto Rico wasn't really all that sure.

"When everything I thought I knew was destroyed, when my beautiful home was destroyed and my people were in pain, you weren't there. Do you have any idea how soul-crushing that is? How betrayed I felt? I started to wonder if all I was was just another trophy left to rot on your shelves. But still, I waited. I waited for help that would never come. An apology consisting *of aid* that would never truly come. So, eventually, I got sick of it. I got sick of waiting for an apology that would never come."

Puerto Rico paused, almost as if he was correcting his previous sentence.

"I got sick of waiting for a good dad that would never come."

The words that tumbled out were blunt, honest. It felt fitting. A part of Puerto Rico didn't want to stop there, so he continued.

"So I went to someone else. I turned to someone who could give me what I wanted- freedom from you. Freedom to find a *new, better* family. I knew they didn't care for me, and that was comforting, in a sense. They didn't put up a facade of caring. They were brutally

honest about how little they cared for me, and I was okay with that. At least they weren't lying, right?"

Puerto Rico's eyes kept wandering around, not even bothering to look at America's face. He didn't care about America's reaction, he just needed to say this for himself, not for anyone else.

"But they took it too far. I should've jumped ship, but... I was too deep into it. My role was suddenly achingly clear. It wasn't a deal anymore, no matter how much I tried to cling back onto that idea for protection. I was just the thing to leech off of and then discard later. They weren't gonna keep their deal. No, they were going to kill and leave nothing behind. Maybe they were in it for revenge- that was what they argued that they were doing- but it's obvious now that they're in it for the power. The bloodshed. Maybe even the power to kill each other, who really knows."

Why was Puerto Rico still speaking? The story was over. The deed, done.

"I followed them, and it led me to death. It's what I get for being a bloody traitor, right? For teaming up with the Confederate? I didn't want to kill you, Da- America, but I'm not sorry."

Huh. And the mouth stills runs. It won't stop, much like the tears pouring down Puerto Rico's cheeks.

Oh.

Those exist.

"I'm not sorry that I finally stood up for myself. I'm not sorry for finally letting go of hope. I'm not sorry for *finally* fighting back. I'm not sorry for finally realizing that you'll never truly see me there. I'm not sorry for finally realizing that the states will forever be front and center, even when I need help. I'm not sorry for finally realizing that no matter how much I plead or beg, you will never *ever* be the dad I need."

Puerto Rico's breath caught in his throat, and he tasted salt. His vision was blurry and unfocused, and that was all he had to say.

There was nothing else.

At least now he's finally told *someone.*

But, instead of the cruel joke being over and everything returning to black, Puerto Rico felt a pair of arms wrap around him.

Instead of the cruel joke being over and everything returning to black, Puerto Rico heard an achingly familiar voice say...

"I'm sorry."

Puerto Rico's breath caught in his throat once again, and he was frozen.

"I don't deserve your forgiveness but..." A pause, then, "but please let me make it up to you *somehow*. ... I don't want you to hurt like this anymore, Rico," The speaker's voice seemed to crack with sorrow. "I'm sorry."

Maybe it was the feeling of being surrounded in someone else's arms. Maybe it was the feeling of freedom that finally came with letting his emotions free to someone who listened. Maybe it was the realization of what was happening, where he was, and who he was actually talking to.

Maybe it was the combination of all those things, or maybe it was nothing at all, but... Puerto Rico felt himself break down. He felt the remainder of his numbness fade and crack away, replaced by wave after wave of sorrow.

The sorrow seemed to drown his thoughts in a strange sort of clarity, the type of clarity you'd normally only get from crying until you got a headache. Things seemed to click into place, and Puerto Rico sniffled.

He had lied.

He *was* sorry.

He didn't want any of this to happen. He wanted to rewind time. He wanted to go back to before the hurricane, when everything was

simpler. He wanted the dad he trusted back. He wanted to forget that Confederate even existed. He wanted to forget the horrid things he had helped Confederate do.

But time had no care for Puerto Rico's wishes.

No, time would keep running along, and Puerto Rico had to continue to run alongside it. Puerto Rico couldn't force time to turn back, and Puerto Rico couldn't lag behind.

Everyone had done their fair share of horrors, and they couldn't take any of them back.

Puerto Rico couldn't take any of them back.

No, the only thing they could do was keep running.

Keep running and never stop.

It was the only option they had.

Things would never be the same. Puerto Rico didn't know if he had the power to forgive.

He didn't know if he could.

It seemed too impossible, too far off. Forgiving and being forgiven... They were distant. Too distant. They were shining far beyond Puerto Rico's reach, shining far too brightly to even be spotted properly.

So what *could* Puerto Rico do?

He couldn't take what he's done back, he couldn't forgive, he wasn't sure if he deserved forgiveness, so... what *should* he do?

A thought seemed to echo and resonate in Puerto Rico's head.

He couldn't take back what he's done but... he could try to make up for it.

He could try again.

Things wouldn't be the same and they probably never will be, but... Puerto Rico can at least help to reverse all the horrible things he's done.

And he knew exactly where he could start.

He could stop Confederate.

And then...

He could go on from there.

It would be tough, but luckily he wasn't the only one who's made unforgivable mistakes.

Puerto Rico sniffled. For now, however, his thoughts were focused on only one thing. Despite thinking it would never happen again, Puerto Rico melted into the hug.

"I'm-"

A small sob.

"I'm so s-sorry, Dad..."

Things will never be the same, but...

Puerto Rico just had this feeling that, somehow, things would end up okay.

Though he might have to wait years and years, things would end up okay.

Or, at least, he hoped that they would.

And, hopefully, this time his hope isn't in vain.

Ch 42: A Piece of Cake \\ The Game Plan

It's easy to forget that dreams don't last forever.

But they all end eventually.

And so, gradually, America felt the feeling of Puerto Rico in his arms slip away until there was nothing.

But it wasn't long until America felt himself waking up in the arms of someone else.

They were strong, and gripped onto America as if he could slip away any second. But America wasn't going anywhere, not any time soon. There was feeling in his arms and legs, his *body* collectively made by the states. But everything felt... *off*, and that's mainly how America could tell that this body wasn't the one he was used to.

Honestly, he was pretty confused. There was a hole in his memory where things should've been, an unexplainable blank filled with confusing, contradicting feelings. He was pretty sure the feelings in that blank of time were the state's feelings spilling over into his own consciousness. How that worked, he had no idea. All he truly knew was that he was being hugged, held by someone. Someone afraid. Someone relieved. Someone America knew all too well. Was it weird that America's heart skipped a beat a little when he recognized him?

No... No, probably not.

America smiled a little bit, warmly saying, "Hi, Russ."

The person holding America stiffened a little bit before relaxing and squeezing America tighter, "Hi, you dork." Russia said back in his stupidly amazing voice. Was it weird that America missed it? He didn't even remember the time he missed. At least... not really.

America smiled faintly, hugging Russia back. Yeah, maybe it was weird that he missed Russia's voice, but America didn't care. He felt like it had been forever since he had seen Russia, even though his final clear memory was of Russia holding him, just like this.

His final clear memory... it was of him confessing his feelings for Russia.

If America was being honest, he thought he was going to die in that moment. Pain had been stretching throughout his limbs, overwhelming his every nerve. In the mental confusion, he did the only thing he could do. The thing he didn't even know would work.

I guess it did work, cause America was back now.

He was alive, not dead.

To be honest, America still didn't know exactly what was going on and what kind of foe he was facing, just that Puerto Rico was somehow a part of it. America should ask him sometime... but how? America couldn't ignore the spike of pain that seemed to shoot through him when he and Puerto Rico made eye contact, making him freeze in his very spot. Something had... happened to Puerto Rico while America was down for the count, and America doubted it was good.

... It was odd, really.

America cared more about Puerto Rico's well-being than his own.

He didn't... he didn't blame Rico at all for trying to kill him. Maybe he should. But... those few moments, it... it gave him a sense of clarity he wouldn't be able to reach under normal circumstances.

In that moment... he so desperately didn't want to die. In that moment, all the guilt and horror that had been plaguing him disappeared, and all that was left was a crippling fear, a voice inside him yelling, *screaming* at him not to die.

But even through all of that- the desperation and the fear- America didn't blame Puerto Rico.

America didn't blame Puerto Rico for a single thing.

Puerto Rico was scared. He was trapped. So he acted out.

And America didn't even *notice.*

He didn't even notice how much pain *his own kid* was in.

America didn't blame Puerto Rico.

... He blamed himself.

Because although the pain taught him he didn't want to die, it didn't teach him how to not feel crushing guilt weighing him down at every mistake. At every error and every failure to act or notice.

Would Puerto Rico have turned to such drastic measures if America had dealt with the situation differently? Would he have turned to such drastic measures if America had given him someone to vent and talk to? Would he have turned to such drastic measures if America had just *done something* about it?

Maybe he still would've, but America had an itching feeling that he wouldn't have. That he wouldn't have betrayed his family if he thought there was any other way. Any other option. And it was America who failed to show him those options. It was America who failed to show him a better way.

He felt Russia separate from the hug, snapping him out of his thoughts. Russia gave him a relieved yet happy smile, a small laugh bubbling out of his lips, "I-I'm sorry, I just- I suppose I just can't believe you're actually back." Russia said and, dragged out of his not-so-pleasant thoughts, America found himself warmly smiling back at the Russian.

"Yeah, I'm back, Ruski." America said softly.

Now, America wasn't sure what he was expecting, but he certainly did expect what Russia said next. Russia had grabbed America by the shoulders and, in an expectedly emotional voice, said, "You're such a goddamn idiot!" America blinked a little bit, taken aback. Even so, he didn't get any chance to defend himself, as Russia

continued, "God, sometimes I wish I could see into that stupid noggin of yours!" America faltered, seeing the way Russia's eyes glistened in the light. He looked like he was about to cry. But Russia didn't seem to notice, instead looking straight into America's eyes, his expression determined, "But I will *never* leave you alone."

America gave Russia a confused look, but Russia kept on going, "You said, in my arms, right before you split-" Russia took in a deep, painful breath at the words, like the very thought of losing America tore his heart apart, "that you couldn't involve me in this." Russia's gaze was determined as he said, "Well, I'm getting involved with this, whether you like it or not. I can't do *nothing* while you're in pain, I just wouldn't be able to live with myself. I wouldn't be able to live without you!"

America felt his throat constrict, getting a small feeling as to where this was going. But, surely...

Then Russia relaxed a little bit, pulling his hands away and laughing slightly. Though, the laugh sounded more stressed and sad than anything, making America frown. "I'm not gonna let you go through this alone anymore, Meri." Russia said softly, smiling faintly at America. After a brief moment of pause, Russia looked down, continuing "What you said... the last time we saw each other..." America stiffened a little bit and Russia looked into America's eyes, "I..."

Russia paused, his brows creasing with all sorts of thoughts. He then spoke slowly,"I won't tell you my response yet... Because... once I say it, there's no going back. And there's no way to know whether all we're doing is walking into a death trap." The image of Puerto Rico falling from the building flashed through Russia's mind, and he winced a little bit. He smiled faintly, saying, "So, I'll get back to you. And the minute we're both free from this *slight* inconvenience, I'll tell you. I promise you that. Although..." A small, faint laugh escaped Russia's lips, "I'm sure my answer's pretty obvious."

America blinked confusedly at Russia before smiling faintly, saying a soft "ok." Russia smiled back, standing up and offering a hand to America. Before America could take Russia's hand, however, he felt

someone crash into him. And then another. And then another. And then another. And then another.

America blinked in surprise, wheezing a little bit at the sudden force. Then, blinking, he recognized the five people who had crashed into him. Within moments, he was grinning stupidly.

It was his family.

He looked awkwardly up at Russia, who was fighting back laughter. Seeing Russia fighting back laughter, America found himself laughing, hugging his family tight.

"Hey, guys."

His smile became softer in nature.

"I'm finally back."

--x--

"So how are we doing this?" Russia asked, crossing his arms as he moved to sit on the conference table, "You just evicted your family from helping- what was even your plan there?"

"I don't know-" America grumbled, "I don't want to bother them with my messed up problems." Noticing Russia's upturned eyebrow, America swiftly added, "Not any more than I have already."

Russia lightly sighed, obviously disapproving of America's actions and saying, "According to your states, we're facing some guy called 'Confederate-' who's he?"

America snapped around to face Russia before his face immediately contorted with disgust and anger, growling out, "Well, shit."

Russia gave America a curious look, "Care to explain?"

"He's..." America frowned, walking up to Russia and sitting in a nearby chair, "He was a revolution of mine." He trailed off before cussing under his breath, "Shit, I thought he was dead..."

"Well, he wasn't, and isn't." A new voice said out of nowhere.

Both America and Russia jumped, Russia jumping into a somewhat offensive position while America simply snapped his head around, recognizing the voice but not understanding how, well, they were here.

A few paces away, an extremely short boy with a red and white flag stood, brow raised at their reactions. Russia and America recognized him immediately- Russia only barely recognized him, though- and America felt confusion swamp over him, the voice and face registering in his mind but not understanding *how* DC was there.

"DC?" America said confusedly, getting up, "How are you here? Why are you here?"

DC seemed to ponder it for a second before saying, "It's hard to explain. Basically, our split has left everyone..." DC seemed to look for the right word, "*loose.* Anyone can wiggle out of the union if they want to now, which is..." DC laughed nervously, "concerning, but also really useful."

America gave DC a concerned look before glancing at Russia, then back at DC, "Uhm- why are you here then?"

DC nodded, "I have a message from Puerto Rico. He would've come himself, but... his body's incredibly damaged. It hasn't healed yet and..." DC looked to the side, almost ashamed, "I don't think he'd survive being out of the union right now."

America's brows furrowed, feeling his heart twist a little, "What... what hurt him?" America asked DC.

"Confederate," DC said simply, walking up to the conference table and sitting at the seat directly across from America.

A little awkward, Russia sat in the seat next to America, clarifying when he noticed America's distraught look. America deserved to know. "Confederate..." Russia looked for the right word, "Confederate basically pushed him off of a roof."

America gave Russia a shocked look, his mouth and throat going dry. That's... that's what happened? Rico had something about being discarded by whoever he was working with, but... America gulped.

Puerto Rico had been thrown off of a roof.

How painful had that been? How much pain did Puerto Rico have to go through? America felt guilt creep up his spine.

None of this would have happened if America had just done *something.*

But America pushed down the guilt. Not right now. Right now, he needed to be focused. He needed to defeat Confederate.

For *good* this time.

DC looked at America before hesitantly saying, "First, he wanted me to tell you that he still hates you and that that hug changed nothing."

America inhaled sharply, harshly ignoring the sting in his heart at that. He had no right to feel hurt. None. Nada.

DC cast America a sad look before continuing, "And that the only reason he's helping us is because he hates Confederate more." America nodded slightly, expectantly looking at DC for him to continue. DC looked back, staring blankly at America for a second before jumping and saying, "Oh! Right, yeah. Continuing with what I was saying, here's what Puerto Rico knows about Confederate.

"First," DC started, putting up one finger to exaggerate that thought before quickly and almost sheepishly tucking it away, "Confederate apparently isn't... Confederate."

America raised a brow and Russia seemed to have a similar, confused reaction, saying, "What does that mean?"

DC seemed to struggle with the wording for a second, "Mental unification." Both Russia and America seemed to flinch at that, and DC grimaced slightly. "It's why Confederate's flag is his battle flag instead of-"

"But who the heck could he have unified with?" America interrupted, confused. His voice was admittedly a bit shaky, too, but it was more of the shock than anything.

You *never* do mental unification.

America remembered the countless stories Britain would warn America with when he was still a colony.

Never unify minds.

Only three outcomes come out of it, and none of them are worth the power you get in exchange.

DC blinked before his brows seemed to scrunch. "Well..." He went, fiddling with his thumbs. He looked up at America, saying, "You."

Russia then interrupted, saying a sharp, *"What?"*

"Er-" DC tried to explain, "Not *you* you, but a part of you. I- oh, how do I explain this? Basically, when Confederate reformed in your mindscape, he ran into the depths of your mind immediately. He went to the parts of your mind the states never dared to venture. And, at some point, he reached your nightmares. And, *somehow,* he merged with one. He merged with your nightmares of him.

"But as we all know," DC rambled on, his eyes drifting to his hands, which were on the table, "you don't have a body in the mindscape, not like Confederate had one anyway at the moment. So, they merged in the only way they could: mentally. And, somehow, in the confusion, the nightmare Confederate gained some semblance of consciousness while the real Confederate started messing around with your mind. After all, he was now, more than he ever was before, a *part* of you. And although he could've gone through with his plan ages ago, he was never strong enough to initiate it... until Puerto Rico came along and helped."

America furrowed his brows slightly, half of this going over his head. But, nevertheless, DC continued, saying, "So Confederate isn't really... *Confederate.* At least... not anymore?"

America sighed before leaning back into his chair. That was a lot to

take in, but... "How strong is this Confederate but not really confederate, anyway?"

"He has Rhode Island and Hawaii under his control."

Then America seemed to pause.

His brows furrowed and he shot up straight, *"What?"* He spoke, his tone coming off as harsh and grating.

DC winced, "Confederate absorbed them using your body. Your real body, that is."

America looked at DC with desperate eyes, "So they're just in his mindscape, then? They're fine, right?"

"Dad..." DC said softly and sadly, his gaze going to his hands.

America stared at DC for a few more moments, hoping for *some* sort of confirmation. Hoping for something- *anything.*

After a few moments of suffocating silence, DC spoke hopelessly, "Dad... They're... There's no way they could've..."

America blinked at him for a few moments before his expression contorted and he pushed himself to his feet, both his mind and the world around him whirling. He practically stumbled into the wall, his heart already knowing what DC was trying to say.

He couldn't protect them.

Tears formed in America's eyes.

They were gone.

He didn't protect them.

And now they were gone.

Russia got to his feet, trailing after America, "Ame? Ame, it's... it's okay, it's not your fault..."

"Not my fault...?" America felt irrational anger hit him, yelling out,

"Of course it's my fault! If I just..." America's hands flew to his hair, pulling on it, "If I didn't listen to that bastard from the very beginning, none of this would've happened! If I just..." America's legs shook, "Hawaii and Rhi would be okay right now if I just-"

"America!" Russia yelled out, reaching forward and grabbing Ame by the shoulders, his expression both stern and soft at the same time. His volume lowering, he said, "It's not your fault. None of this is. Confederate was the one..." He swallowed, "Confederate was the one who killed them, not you. You were... you were practically *dead-"* Russia's voice cracked, "You were practically dead when all of this happened, it's *not* your fault."

"Yeah, Dad." DC agreed, standing up, his expression contorted with concern, "It's not your fault... there was nothing you could do."

America looked down at his feet, his mind swirling with guilt and questions and... *hatred.* A pounding, growing hatred that was spreading to every limb in his body.

Because they were right.

There *was* nothing he could've done, and... and yet...

America winced, pushing down the nauseating feeling of guilt. Instead he tried to focus his rage on something else- *someone* else. After a few moments of scrambling, his brain settled on Confederate. In instants, pure loathing overwhelmed America and he clenched his jaws.

All of this...

It was all that *damn* bastard's fault.

He... he needed to *pay.*

Pay for everything he's done to America- everything he's done to America's *family.*

But how?

Expression hardening with anger and rage, America's mind got to

work. After a moment, he paused, saying, "Wait." He turned to DC, "He only has Rhode Island and Hawaii?"

"Yeah?" DC answered with a questioning tone to his voice.

"No one else?"

DC blinked a little bit in further confusion before he sputtered out a "yeah, basically?"

And suddenly, it all felt too perfect. Like stealing candy from a baby.

None of the states have their own military.

Confederate would have to go to his newfound lands and build up a military from the inside out.

And Confederate most definitely didn't expect America to come back, because...

All America had to do was confront Confederate before he left New York, and...

And Confederate's done for, no army to back him up or provide him with physical strength.

America turned to the conference table, putting his hands on it and leaning forward, a determined expression on his face, "I know exactly how we can beat him."

America's expression hardened.

"We'll make him regret ever daring to mess with us a second time."

Ch 43: Everything goes black... again \\ The Alleyway

America was at a computer, Russia over his shoulder. You see, their plan was dependent on the fact that they would *find* Confederate, which, under normal circumstances, would be damn near impossible. But, lucky for them, they were in America. With... America. Thus, America had his ways to find what he wanted and search for what he wanted.

...

They're called cameras.

In any big city, you can find cameras everywhere. Whether it's for security reasons or for overviewing traffic or for really any reason, there are cameras. And, a whole bunch of them are connected to the police.

Guess who has access to the police?

Er- well, pretty much has access to the police. It's complicated.

Anywho, here they were, searching video feed after video feed for a certain X-faced figure. Now, it's not like they were going in blind and going through every single camera in New York City, one by one. No... that'd be pretty dumb. No, they were using facial recognition software- or at least *trying* to use facial recognition software- to locate Confederate. The only problem is... well, it's just that the only pictures they really had for reference... were pictures of America. Thus, the software was having a tremendously hard time actually locating Confederate.

Thus, Russia and America were left waiting... and waiting... and waiting as the software scrolled and flicked through camera after camera in the blink of an eye, yet somehow still being unable to find any matches.

In that dimly lit room, seconds stretched into minutes and minutes bled into hours. It was practically impossible to tell the time or how much time had even passed.

For all they knew, they had already blown it.

For all they knew, Confederate was already long gone, and they had missed their best snake to kill the snake before it even came out of its egg.

America didn't know how long he had been sitting there, anxiously staring at that bright screen. Simply watching it was exhausting somehow... but he had to do it. He had to find him. America had no avenge what he had lost.

He *had* to beat Confederate into the ground for what he's done.

And so the time passed... and passed... and passed, Time crawling to a devastatingly slow pace.

America was so bored out of his mind that he almost missed it.

In an instant, America leaped forward, waking the almost asleep Russian up as he practically slammed his fingers onto the spacebar to make the software stop on the video feed it was on.

There he was.

America felt rage and success brew within the depths of his heart.

There that damn bastard was.

He was walking down the city streets, seemingly concentrated on something. If America had to bet on anything, He was probably headed towards Penn station to catch a train to Providence. America growled slightly, narrowing his eyes.

Not on America's watch.

But they really had to be quick if they wanted to catch him.

Standing up abruptly, America raced to the door, calling out, "Come

on, we have a confederate to catch!"

Staring bewilderedly at the computer, Russia got up as well, staring at the figure on the screen before growling and chasing after America. He clenched his hands into fists. This time would be different.

This time, America wasn't alone.

This time, Russia wasn't going to let him die.

--x--

'Always be aware. You never know what they might do.'

That was the last piece of advice Puerto Rico sent their way through the medium of DC, right after they had stolen a quick gun. Er- guns. One for each of them.

You know, just in case.

'Always be aware.'

America pulled out his gun as he and Russia stepped into the dark alleyway where Confederate was spotted last. You see, the funny thing about this one, specific alleyway was that it led to a dead end- don't ask how America knows that- so... if he went into the alleyway not too long ago and the cameras haven't yet spotted him come out the same way...

Chances are, he's still in there.

Waiting.

But why? *Why?*

Surely, he...

Surely...

America bit his lip, feeling his hands start to shake. What could be waiting for them down this corridor? What horrible thing does

Confederate have planned for them? America... America didn't know. And, considering Confederate's *amazing* track record... America wasn't sure that he wanted to find out. He wasn't sure...

America jumped as a hand landed on his shoulder. Turning his head to the side, he spotted Russia... smiling? "Hey..." He spoke reassuringly, his smile becoming just the slightest bit more confident, "It'll be okay... We're in this together. I'll always have your back."

America blinked a little at Russia before his heart warmed and he smiled back at Russia. Looking ahead of them, America took in a deep breath, a small, confident smile lingering on his face, "Right. Together."

Together.

He wasn't... He wasn't *alone* this time. He wasn't alone anymore.

And he'll... he'll probably never be alone again, right?

Right.

Exhaling calmly, America took a step forward into that dark alleyway, his heart pounding as one thought lingered and dwelled in his mind. He wasn't... he wasn't alone!

And, after stalking down the alleyway for long enough, America paused. Just a few paces ahead stood Confederate. But... it was all... *off*. Like that one scene in a horror movie... because, well...

Confederate stood there completely, almost deathly still, facing the wall ahead of him, his back to America and Russia. He had... walked into the dead end? And just... stopped?

With a sickening jolt, America suddenly got a horrible feeling about all this. A sickening feeling twisting in his gut that *something* wasn't right. That something was about to go horribly wrong. But... America seemed to be the only one affected by this because Russia didn't react at all. He was just standing there, completely unaffected by this suffocatingly bad feeling as he practically grilled holes into the back of Confederate's head, his trigger finger twitching and

yearning to shoot.

Gulping slightly, America cocked his gun, already aiming straight for Confederate's head. America opened his mouth to say something as his hands started to shake, but nothing came out, his gut feeling overwhelming his every sense and his legs and mind yelling at him to *run.*

But America had nothing to be afraid of.

He had... he had nothing to be afraid of!

Confederate's just a small, tiny rebellion now! America could *crush* him in a millisecond!

So why? *Why* was he shaking? *Why* was every fiber of his being *screaming* at him to run?!

He had nothing to fear!

...

Or at least, he thought he did.

...

America nervously adjusted his grip on the gun and, after a few terrifying seconds, Confederate's head turned to look at America. America felt himself freeze. Confederate's eye- the one that America could see, at least- was like a miniature void. A black hole *sucking* him in, peeling and scratching at his skin and pulling him ever closer until he's... until he's *gone,* reduced to the nothing that ate him. *Those... those* were not eyes. They were blanks of space- cracks of reality- in which nothing could exist and nothing could truly linger. They reminded America of his own eyes before he... *died* and, oddly enough, that... that's what terrified him the most.

But it didn't end there.

Despite the void that was Confederate's eyes, a glowing red occurred in its depths, breaking the rules already broken and piercing deep into America's own eyes. Just the sight of those

blazing, controlling red eyes were enough to make America freeze in his tracks, his throat closing up on him in instants.

With just one look, America was terrified, unable to move like a deer caught in the headlights.

Up until now, he had never gone face to face with... *this* Confederate himself, and now?

In that moment of pure, uncontrollable fear, America finally understood what DC meant by Confederate merging with America's nightmares. The terror freezing America's body and making his heart want to run out of his own chest gave a sense of clarity unseen before. America had never been more afraid in his life, looking into those terrifying red irises, and *that* made him understand.

And then Confederate smiled.

His lips twisted upwards to create a cruel, horrific smile, one that seemed to scream all sorts of terrors and horrors into America's ears. That smile, despite being a *smile* of all things, somehow struck more terror into America's heart than him almost dying.

America felt himself take in shaky, raspy breaths, his entire body shaking beneath Confederate's gaze. Beneath that... that *monster's* gaze.

And America thought that he himself was the monster this entire time.

But no, he couldn't have been more wrong. This... *whatever* Confederate was now... *he* was the monster, and America couldn't compare if he tried.

He couldn't compare even if he tried.

And, though he had been seemingly deathly still just moments before, Confederate suddenly twisted around, lunging towards America, a devilish grin on his face and his eyes glowing brighter than ever before. America immediately felt his heart shoot up to his throat and choke him, stumbling backwards with pure fear the

second his mind registered Confederate's lunge.

Confederate reached his hand out and America, completely forgetting about the gun in his hands in his *blinding, screeching* fear, stumbled wildly backwards, just trying to get away in his sudden, choking desperation. Reaching forward, Confederate grabbed America by the head, and-!

And, suddenly, everything had returned to dark, as it was meant to be.

Ch 44: Monster \\ The Final Confrontation

It didn't take long for America to realize where he was.

He was in the mindscape. *His* mindscape. Though... it certainly didn't feel like his anymore. Everything was wrong, *off*.

Behind him, there were the states, seemingly confused.

Ahead of them... stood Confederate.

But... there was something different about him. If you looked *just* close enough, Confederate seemed... blurry, almost? And if you looked even closer, it looked like two different people were phasing in and out of the same silhouette, both miles apart in appearance. One of them had the War flag America was so familiar with... the other had Confederate's true flag, not his war flag, the stars and the bars. The Stars and Bars had a seemingly irritated yet concentrated expression on his face, as if this was all just some miniscule nuisance he had to begrudgingly deal with.

Though, if you looked close enough, fragments of fear and confusion could be seen in his eyes.

The other... the other was *different,* to say the least. Not only did he have Confederate's war flag, but he seemed to be cast in a constant, inexplicable shadow. Just... everything about him was darker, drearier. Well, everything except his eyes, which shone a glowing red. In direct contrast to the darkness of his silhouette, there was a wide smile on his face, twisting upwards in an inexplicably cruel way that somehow seemed to make America's heart stop.

But, nevertheless...

What the heck just happened?

One moment, they were in the alley and the next...?

The next, he was dragged into the mindscape like it was no big deal. Did it... America looked intently at... "Confederate," watching the two blurry figures with concentration as he forcibly ignored the fear that seemed to fester in his heart. Did the... *blurriness* have to do with the nightmare DC mentioned? The part of him that somehow merged with Confederate? America peered at them, before pausing on the one cast in shadow, the one with glowing red eyes and a smile that made America's heart stop... with *fear*.

No doubt...

That shadow is it. The nightmare. That part of him that somehow got separated from him.

America felt himself tense, glaring at the two. Or... the one?

Bars seemed to join his other half in smiling, the shadow letting out a low growl- a low rumble that seemed to shake the mindscape itself. America's eyes widened as he watched the world around him shake before glaring back at them, his lips twisted downwards in a scowl as he threatened...

But nothing came out.

His voice was trapped in an invisible box, a cage where nothing could escape.

A cage *he* couldn't escape.

It was then that Bars took a step forward, the shadow suddenly snapping into place and phasing *into* Bars. Within instants, Bars's white eyes were stained a pitch black and those signature, bright, menacing blood red irises suddenly glowed into existence as his flag twisted and changed into his war flag. Noticing America's wary and fearful look, his grin only seemed to lengthen, his mouth opening to speak, "Well, I'm assuming since *you're* here, Puerto Rico survived his little... *fall.*"

Confederate's eyes grazed across the crowd of states, seemingly looking for that one, familiar face... Unable to find him, however,

Confederate simply shrugged, continuing on, "Well, whatever... but I suppose..." He grinned a little bit, "Has Puerto Rico told you my little secret yet? The little ace up my sleeve?"

America's expression forcibly hardened and he clenched his fists, growling. Luckily, this time, his voice managed to escape its cage, rumbling out into the world- er, mindscape? "Oh, that you're a little bitch? I think I've heard that one already, yeah."

But despite the fearless tone America tried to impersonate, his voice shook- it *trembled*... and America couldn't stop it from doing so.

Confederate gave America a wry look, taking a bold step forward, "Well, for your sake, I guess I'll just tell you anyway." He tilted his head to the side, "I'm... *you.* I'm your worst nightmares, forever a part of you." Confederate's grin became almost smug in nature, "Forever... in more *control* than you... I mean, whoever said *dreams* can't be in control? You see... I'm gonna tell you a little secret..." His voice lowered to a whisper, his very expression *taunting* America, "I have more control over your mind than you could ever know."

His lips suddenly twisted unnaturally upwards, and he lunged forward. America yelped, stumbling backwards and bringing his arms up to block any sort of blow. Shit, shit, *shit!*

"Take that, you bastard!"

...

Wait a second... that wasn't Confederate's voice, or his own... No, that was... America lowered his arms in surprise.

Puerto Rico.

He was standing there, his chest heaving as if he had just run a marathon or something. A few paces to the left of Puerto Rico, Confederate stood, his eyes blazing with rage. It was obvious he hadn't been expecting the interruption, and he was *not* happy.

But Puerto Rico seemed unaffected by Confederate's rage and America's shock, simply turning around toward America, pointing at him and saying determinedly, "I am *not* doing this cause I

consider you family or anything like that, I just hate Confederate more. Remember that."

America blinked at Rico for a few seconds before, surprisingly, a small, nervous laugh escaped his lips. Actually, no... it wasn't nervous it was... *relieved.* Relieved that someone was there to help and, admittedly, disbelieving of Puerto Rico's lie.

Puerto Rico stared determinedly at America for a few moments before scoffing slightly and looking away. As he did this, he pointed behind him with his thumb, murmuring, "Oh, yeah, the others are here, too."

America blinked, looking to where Puerto Rico was pointing. There, all the various states and territories stood, most of them looking like they were about ready to kick ass. America felt a smile tweak the edges of his lips up, and he spoke out of relief and shock, "You guys..."

Sure... he was their dad. *He* should be the one protecting them.

But... in that moment he was so relieved that he didn't think of that.

He was just... so glad he wasn't facing this horror alone.

No, he will never face this alone.

He had his family, his friends, *Russia*... So many people were on his side. So many people were *waiting* for him to shove Confederate's face into the mud! America turned towards the fuming Confederate, confidence and determination festering and brewing in his heart. He could do this. He wasn't alone. *They* could do this. Together, they could squash Confederate like the little bug he is.

And America was ready.

...

A laugh.

Did you know that a laugh can be terrifying?

A laugh... maybe a single laugh has to force to take down a whole army. A whole crowd.

Confederate had laughed. He looked them all in eyes... and he *laughed.* He laughed like a king on a throne looking down at a bunch of revolting peasants. He laughed like there was an army behind him and crowd to massacre.

He laughed like a man who held nothing but contempt and malice in his heart, with absolutely no room left for a pitiful thing such as fear.

That was his laugh. A laugh of malice and blood and victory. A laugh that told a million things, and told a million stories. A laugh that simply couldn't come from someone who still had humanity in their heart.

And all the courage festering in America's heart crumbled to the ground upon that horrid laugh, disappearing in seconds.

Confederate looked up at America. He was no longer laughing; but even still, the laugh seemed to linger and echo, sticking around even when Confederate's lips had closed. That putrid smile returning to his face, he muttered in a devastatingly low tone- his voice really just a whisper in the wind yet somehow managing to be louder and more powerful than any booming drum, "Well... I have to say that's not fair, America. So, how about this... let's even the playing field, shall we?"

Confederate smirked a little bit and, raising his arm in an almost painfully slow endeavor, he snapped his fingers.

The effect was instant. Within moments, Puerto Rico's eyes widened and he seemed to stop moving completely, almost as if he was paralyzed- stuck in place. Upon looking around, it seemed as though the same had happened to the rest of the states and territories, their bodies seemingly frozen in time.

America's eyes widened as he saw this happen, desperately growling out in some failing attempt to grasp onto the only hope he had, "What did you do?!"

"Didn't I tell you?" Confederate snickered, dusting off his imaginary clothes as he began to step forward, "I leveled the playing field." He gestured to the frozen scenery around them- like an army of statues, standing still for all of eternity, "You're all alone, America."

Then, the white void around America started to shake, and America's head whipped back to face Confederate, that smiling bastard. His expression desperate at this point, America snarled and lurched forward, desperate to do *something*-- but before he could get his hands on Confederate, the world around him shook even worse- to a violent extent- and America stumbled on one of the many cracks that formed, falling into...

...

...

...

America woke up in a cold sweat, sadness overwhelming his bones for some odd reason. He sat up on his bed, looking around the room. It was his bedroom- his home in DC. After a few moments of confusion, he pushed himself to his feet, blinking at his surroundings. That's... odd.

He had an odd feeling that he should be somewhere right now.

That he should be *doing* something.

Something important.

But before he could grasp onto the feeling, it faded away into the crevices of his mind, wisping away into the land of the forgotten.

I guess...

I guess it was just a dream.

Partially satisfied with that answer, America looked around his room once more. On his nightstand were his glasses, and, them being there feeling weird and out of place, America grabbed them, heading into his bathroom. Looking at the mirror, America noticed

how... awful he looked. His eyes were red and puffy... Did he cry last night? He couldn't... remember. He got the feeling he had a bad dream, but the details were lost to him, faded away just like that strange feeling... wait. What strange feeling? America didn't know. I mean... it was probably just from his dream or something... And, as dreams usually are, America couldn't remember it.

Sighing a little bit from the mental confusion, America put his glasses on, heading downstairs to make breakfast. He meandered his way around the kitchen, eventually just deciding on a bowl of cereal. As he ate, he kept on glancing over to his hands. He... for some reason, he felt like there should be something there. But there was nothing- it was just his normal, pearly white hands.

Shrugging, America finished up his breakfast and coolly headed over to his car, getting inside and driving to work to start the daily routine- the nine to five. Falling into his morning routine, America seemed to just barely be present, his body present but his mind far off. Eventually, before America knew it, the day was over and he prepared to go home, making sure he had everything he needed to continue working there. Exiting his office, America spotted a woman right outside his door, about to knock on it. Judging from her appearance, she was probably a secretary or something. She looked new to the job, too.

Looking at her, America smiled confidently, saying, "Heya! What is it, miss?"

She jumped a little from America suddenly coming out of the door but, quickly collecting herself, she smiled sheepishly, speaking in a rather soft voice, "I came here to alert you that you have a series of meetings in the UN Headquarters from Wednesday of this week to the end of next week."

America raised a brow, "Series of meetings? At the UN Headquarters?" He gave her a sympathetic smile, "I'm sorry if I'm wrong but... aren't those next month?"

She lightly shook her head, "No, no... the schedule changed. Some complications here and there... So the meetings got moved to this month. They might still hold meetings next month, though. It really

depends. But, just in case, they simply moved the meetings."

America nodded. Well that sounded... confusing, and it sounded like a lot of pointless work.

So, normal work, basically.

America started to walk his way out of the building as they talked, making sure the secretary was following him, "So has travel and everything already been worked out?"

"Yes, of course. Your private jet has already been prepared, you just need to pack tonight- the plane is supposed to leave tomorrow."

America smiled a little bit, joking- though, admittedly, he had to fight against a frown. He still had some paperwork to finish... that *and* packing for a flight was bound to be... oh, what was the word for it? It sounded like a lot of overbearing work- America will just go with that phrase.

"Tomorrow? So soon? Well, I sure hope I don't miss my own plane. But thank you, miss. I'll be at the airport early tomorrow morning." America spoke, waving a small goodbye as he picked up his pace a little bit to lose the secretary. The meetings moved... well, not that he could really complain. He just wished he was told... *sooner* than this. But it was whatever. Not like America could do much against it now.

--x--

Wednesday was boring. To put it simply, he didn't have any meetings that day. He probably was *supposed* to have a meeting, but it got swapped around like so many other meetings. But it was whatever, America was fine with this. So, to satiate his boredom and save himself from doing nothing all day, he just told his driver to take him to wherever- a random memorial or park, maybe. One not all that busy.

Once they arrived at the random, not-busy memorial, America stepped out of the car, blinking around at the memorial the driver ended up choosing. Practically no one was there- the place was

practically empty, not a person in sight. Odd, but it wasn't like America was complaining. Then, America looked up, *actually* seeing the memorial this time.

Huh.

It looked weird.

But art is art, right? America laughed a little bit at the thought. Stepping forward to read a plaque, America finally figured out what memorial this was. It was apparently called the teardrop memorial. It was for 9/11... A gift from... America scoffed a little bit.

Russia.

"What are you doing here?"

Well, damn.

If that wasn't excellent timing, America didn't know what was.

America turned around to face who spoke- Russia, if you'd believe it- and smiled a little bit, remarking in a teasing tone, "Excellent timing, Russia. Was just thinking about you."

Russia gave America a weird look before scoffing a little bit, "Of course you were."

America grinned, laughing a little bit as he spoke sarcastically, "Nice monument, by the way. It looks..." America glanced at it before facing Russia once more, trying to get an edge out of him, "questionable at best."

Maybe, under different circumstances, he would've been too tired to play this stupid game. Maybe, under different circumstances, they would've had a decent conversation.

Maybe, under different circumstances, this would all be different.

Maybe, under different circumstances... this would no longer feel so *wrong*.

Russia looked to the side, his lips set in a frown. After a few moments of frustrated silence, he spoke, his tone clearly showing that he was already tired of America's presence, "Is it too much to ask for you to be grateful-- for you to shut up for once?"

"Yeahhhh, I'm afraid that's just a little bit above your paygrade, Russia." America grinned. "We all know that I'm incapable of shutting up. How about this instead- is it too much to ask for you to take a joke for once?"

Russia immediately scoffed, his expression twisting with frustration as he turned to go walk away. Though America could barely hear it, he could've sworn Russia snarl under his breath, "To think I thought we could have a decent conversation for once."

America watched almost blankly as Russia walked off. And, unable to explain why, he felt an incredible feeling of loss hit him. Like he had just lost the chance of a lifetime.

Lost a love he never knew he had.

America's brows furrowed, and he tilted his head slightly. How... odd. Feeling his mouth move on its own, America called out with an inexplicable smile, "Hey! You better remember, I owe you a piano performance!"

America didn't know where it came from, when he ever promised Russia a piano performance, but it felt right. Russia seemed to snap around, his expression completely and oddly blank. Devoid of life. Devoid of expression.

America's smile fell off his face as he stared at Russia. He couldn't explain what it was, but... looking into Russia's eyes... he had never been so deeply unsettled in all his life. America pried his eyes off of Russia's, his throat dry. He looked around the memorial, to where he remembered seeing some pedestrians.

America gulped, stumbling backwards.

They were all looking at him.

They were staring at him, their expressions devoid of life, devoid of

expression.

Devoid of anything and everything other than existential terror.

Just like Russia.

What was going on?

America gulped, fumbling for words. "I- ummm," His eyes wide, they flicked from person to person, dread collecting and pooling in America's gut ceaselessly, "Nev-nevermind, I guess- I- uhhhh- I said nothing! Nothing at all. Frick off."

Things were still for a moment, too still. And then, everything just seemed to return to normal. The nearby pedestrians continued talking about whatever, completely ignoring America. Russia simply gave America a weird look before his expression hardened and he rolled his eyes, ducking into his car.

America released a breath he didn't know he was holding. What... what *was* that?

He... America looked around nervously before beginning to speed-walk towards his car.

He needed to get out of here, and quickly.

--x--

It was Monday morning when America heard the voice. He was in a meeting, just about ready to fall asleep to UN's voice droning on and on and on and on when-

"America!"

America jumped, whipping his head around. That sounded like... Russia's voice? America whipped his head to look at where Russia sat. America studied the Russian for a few moments, his expression twisted confusion. Russias was just... *sitting* there, his own expression focused yet also bored. Almost like... he hadn't even said a word? Not to mention... no one else had reacted to Russia's voice. Was... was America being messed with? Or... was he imagining

things? Biting his lip, America scoffed slightly, facing the front of the room. He... he probably just didn't get enough sleep last night.

He definitely didn't get enough sleep last night.

...

But he kept on hearing that same voice, Russia's voice, over and over and over and over again- Each time saying his name, sometimes with some extra words attached. By the time the meeting was almost over, America had had enough of it. He was so *freaking* pissed off. There was *no* way this voice was his imagination. It was too real, it was too *desperate,* it was too...

America bit his lip in frustration, his expression twisted with confused rage.

It was too eerily familiar. Too sweet. It was Russia's voice, but different. *So* different. Different in a way America couldn't explain, even if he tried.

And he was sick of it.

He was sick of... *liking* it. The way it resonated in his brain.

It wasn't right. No, it *was* right. It felt- no! No, it wasn't right! It wasn't right at all! It was annoying, and *seriously* getting on America's nerves!

The second the meeting ended, America stormed out of the meeting room, making his way over to the nearest bathroom. Entering it, he immediately screamed to the mirror, pointing accusingly at his reflection, "What the fuck do you want?!"

Glaring at his own reflection for a few seconds, America heard the door open, whipping around to glare at whoever entered.

God *dammit.*

It was Russia.

And, in moments, America's frustration spilled over as he marched

up to the tree, yelling, "What did you do to me?! Why do I keep hearing your *damn* voice in my head?!"

Russia glared at America before his glare seemed to melt away, staring at America like some sort of puzzle he couldn't understand, "My voice? What do you mean? I did nothing to you."

"Hah, of *course* you didn't- as *if!* Like I'm gonna believe that pathetic lie!" America snarled, taking a bold step forward and encroaching on Russia's personal space, "You're gonna tell me what the *fuck* you're doing or so help me!"

Russia snarled back, raising his volume to a yell, "I don't know what you're talking about, you lu-"

America lurched forward, grabbing Russia's tie and yanking him down to America's level with a growl, "Don't you *dare* lie to me you Russian basta-"

"America!"

America suddenly paused, snapped out of his blinding rage for a split second, before he snarled once more, his rage flaring back to life like an unquenchable fire, "You just did it again!"

"Wha-" Russia yelled, "What the hell are you talking about, America?! I've done nothi-"

America suddenly paused, once more interrupting Russia to say determinedly, "Repeat that."

"Wha-"

"Say my name, Russia! Do it!" America commanded, his mind racing. Wha- why- something sounded wrong about Russia's voice now. There was something off, something wrong. Something was wrong.

Russia blinked at America, fear and confusion flashing through his gaze before he hesitantly complied, saying, "America?"

America stood there for several seconds, his expression suddenly

going blank. Why was it that...

Why was it that the voice in America's head sounded real, while... while Russia's sounded fake?

Something was wrong.

Something wasn't right.

An equation wasn't adding up in America's head.

Something was right here.

Maybe...

Maybe nothing was.

America furrowed his eyebrows, releasing Russia's tie and taking a wary step back. He stared at Russia for several moments before saying, "Who are you?" Notably, his voice was no longer shrouded in a thick layer of rage- instead, his voice held a tone of confusion and wariness.

Russia scrambled back, coughing slightly. His hands hovering over his neck, Russia stared at America like he was some sort of alien that just landed on Earth, his voice strained just the slightest bit, "What- what are you even talking about? Do you even *hear* yourself right now?"

America frowned, saying with a small growl, *"Just answer me."*

Russia glared at America for a few moments before saying, "I'm Russi-"

"No you aren't." America interrupted, looking straight into Russia's eyes, an unspeakable challenge being thrown into the air, "*You*... aren't Russia. You don't... you aren't him, I just know." America clenched his hands into fists, his knuckles going white, "Who the hell are you?"

Russia stared at America for a few moments and, after a few moments, his expression gradually became more and more blank.

Devoid of expression, devoid of... We've been through this before.

But, this time... Russia's completely blank expression wasn't as unsettling. It wasn't as mind-numbing.

America glanced around, feeling as though something was off- that something was missing. "You... you aren't Russia." America glanced back at the mirror. Suddenly, everything felt off. Wonky.

Wrong.

And that feeling was so much more noticeable than before.

His mind flashed back to their conversation at the memorial, racing through everything that happened. Shifting through everything that happened back then. Shifting through every sound he heard, every thing he saw...

Wait.

When... when did pedestrians show up? When he arrived at the memorial, there wasn't a person in sight. Their conversation felt odd, too... and... and why does "Russia" keep on giving him that look?

"You're... you're not the person I owe a piano performance."

This wasn't right.

This was off.

This didn't-

This didn't feel *real.*

...

None of this was real.

...

Upon that all-too sudden realization of America's, the world around him only seemed to confirm his suspicions. Suddenly, the world

around him shook violently, almost making him stumble to the ground as his head whipped around wildly to stare, bewildered, at the shaking world around him.

An- An earthquake? But... how...

America's thought seemed to still, his eyes somehow widening further.

In the reflection of the mirror, where Russia was supposed to be, Soviet stood. An eye patch over his right eye, and a cold, condescending gaze, looking down on the world and everyone in it- it was exactly how America remembered it. America whipped around to face him, the tall beast towering over him.

This... This couldn't be real.

America gulped, taking a step back.

This isn't real.

He...

"You died... You died years ago... how are you here?" America spoke, his voice trembling just the slightest bit. Soviet looked at America blankly, his expression neutral yet condescending. Cold.

And then he stepped forward.

America jumped, his eyes widening as he continued to stumble backwards, the fear and tension in the room choking him. No, no, no... This can't be real, this can't be real. This couldn't be real-

"You died years ago, goddammit, why are you still here?!" America screamed out, desperate.

"America!"

America's eyes widened, a spike of unbelievable pain shooting through him. He looked down. A red arm had gone through his gut, sticking out of his back in a grotesque way. The urge to throw up suddenly gathered in America's throat. Numbly, America looked up,

gagging slightly on his own bile.

Or was that blood?

America didn't know.

But... he did know who was now in front of him.

Confederate.

And America remembered everything in one split second, the fogginess covering his memories instantly clearing upon the sight of those red, blazing irises.

America felt sick.

Horribly sick.

America lurched forward a little bit, unable to stay solid on his feet as he felt himself cough up... *something.*

America truthfully wasn't sure what he had coughed up- blood or bile... America wasn't sure if it mattered all that much anymore.

Confederate smiled coolly at America, his arm that was once soviet's still embedded in America's gut. Trust me when I said the sight isn't all that pleasant. "Now, now, America... I had my fun, but..." He grinned, "You really should get going, hm? Soviet, that nice guy, is waiting to beat your ass in the afterlife, after all. Well... if there *is* even an afterlife."

And, just like that, Confederate effortlessly yanked his arm out of the hole now present in America's gut. America's eye widened, pain overwhelming his senses. Man, that probably should've happened sooner. Within seconds, the world seemed to twist around America, and his vision started clouding over. Suddenly, America saw the floor rush towards him, and he had hit the ground. And, soon, all he could really see was red.

His own blood, probably.

Confederate simply stared down at America in victory, his lips

twisted in a smug sense of victory, "It really is a shame that it all has to end like this... but you can never defeat your nightmares, America. And now, *your* mindscape is now, well, *mine*."

His...

...

Through the blood and confusion, dull memories lingered in America's mind's eye. The states, his family, his friends... his entire life seemingly flashing before his eyes in some sort of grayed out, cheap movie.

For some reason, out of everything, Russia lingered the most. A small scrap of warmth amongst all the cold and gray.

"America, please!"

America's hand twitched slightly.

No... No, it can't end like this.

Russia's... Russia's waiting for him.

Russia's... Russia's been *calling* for him.

How long had he been calling for America? For how long has Russia been desperately calling America's name?

He...

America couldn't leave Russia. He couldn't. Not now, not... not ever.

...

He didn't want to die.

He didn't want to die!

Confederate smirked down at America, lightly nudging America's head with his foot, "Sweet Nightmares, you monster."

Monster...

That word hit against a pool of water. An odd, single drop in a vast lake. One thought among many. Clear. See through. Though, also blue if enough is collected. The thought hit against an empty skull, a dying man.

Maybe... maybe, in the end, America *was* a monster.

But in these moments, this odd sense of clarity reached only through the lingering knowledge that death was already knocking, America didn't think so. America wasn't the monster he had made himself out to be.

He knew that now.

He knew it more than anything.

He was just... He was just another messed up person trying to survive this damned clown show called life.

And he messed up a lot. He hurt *so* many people...

But... maybe it was best to just...

Maybe it was best to move on- never forgetting, but not letting it control him either. Maybe it was best to simply remember that this world of his isn't all black and white.

And then, a sense of... *peace* stumbled upon America. A feeling that had been so distant and far away that America had forgotten what it felt like.

He had forgotten what it felt like to just breathe.

In and out. In and out.

He had forgotten what it felt like to know that everything would be okay.

...

Everything would be okay.

...

...

...

But even with the calming peace America felt in those moments, it wasn't enough. It was enough for him, because...

He still didn't want to die.

He didn't want to die. He didn't want to go. He didn't want to leave Russia behind- who was he to not answer Russia's call?

And, as far as America was concerned... this mindscape was *his* till the moment he died. And since this was *his* mind...

He could do anything, right?

I mean... he honestly was pretty dumb not to think of this before, but even still...

America closed his eyes, focusing on his wound. This was *his* mind, and...

He was *not* going to let his damned nightmares take control.

Like magic, America felt the pain in his gut subside and, the world blurry and unfocused, America slowly pushed himself to his feet, facing a shocked Confederate.

The clarity of a near-death experience not yet fading away, America spoke, wincing as his wound healed before his eyes, "Yeah, maybe you're right- maybe I'll never be able to defeat my nightmares. Maybe I'll always be afraid of them... but..." America looked straight at Confederate, saying as his wound completely healed, "I will *never* let them control me. Not ever again. Yeah, I'm messed up. I've messed up a lot. I have a lot of things to work on, a lot of monsters I need to defeat... but I'm not alone like I thought I was. I'm not the *monster* I thought I was."

America lurched forward, towards Confederate. Confederate's eyes

widened, but he didn't move backwards in time, his silhouette splitting in two upon America grabbing him by his arm. The Stars and Bars as well as the shadow returned, phasing violently in and out of each other as they tried to escape from America's frighteningly strong grip.

They barely even noticed that they had started to glow.

America glared at them, saying simply with a small grin, "As far as I'm concerned... My name is America, bitch!"

Bars glared at America for moments more before noticing how he and his shadow had begun to glow. The shadow noticed as well, screeching into the white void surrounding them. At the same time, Bars's eyes widened- in fear, maybe- as he started to laugh insanely, "Don't you understand what you're doing, America? Your mind will be destroyed!"

America grinned, "How will it be destroyed if I'm just taking back a piece of my mind that *you* stole?" His grin fell off his face, and he spat out, "Goodbye, Confederate. I honestly hope I *never* see you again."

Bars looked up at America, his eyes desperate, before snarling out a "No, no, no, no, no!" Within an instant, he and his shadow had lunged forward to attack America- the shadow characteristically more violent in its approach, but...

The blow never hit.

Before Bars could close the gap between them to force America off of him, he and his shadow were gone, fading into the non-existent wind. The fight seemingly over, America took a sudden breath in as he fell to the floor of the mindscape. Suddenly, fuzzy memories and thoughts and emotions bombarded his mind, disorienting him with their intensity. America brought his hand up to his face, noticing how his own silhouette seemed to fuzz and blur, just like how Confederate's had.

Taking in a deep breath, America closed his hands into a fist, shoving down the barrage of feelings and information.

They weren't... they weren't *his*.

And he had no intention on doing anything with them other than forgetting about them.

America looked up, seeing the white void start to fade away. Relief hit him, and he smiled.

It was all over.

Confederate was gone.

Confederate was gone.

...

And the world returned to a pleasant black.

Ch 45: Together? \\ Always.

When America glowed and Confederate's body proceeded to collapse to the ground, Russia didn't know how to react. His throat had gone dry and suddenly, unexpectedly, he could do nothing.

He could do nothing.

He had rushed forward, desperation in his eyes and expression as he grabbed Confederate- America?- by the shoulders. It didn't take too long for Russia to realize there was an internal struggle of sorts. The shapes of Confederate's flag were barely recognizable at this point, a weird blend of America's and Confederate's flags.

So what else could Russia do but call for America to wake up? To come back to him. Again.

He did *not* want to lose America again.

But America's flag seemed to be draining more and more out of his face. Confederate was winning. A desperate plea rose in Russia's throat.

"America!"

America- Confederate?- jerked suddenly, as if he had heard his name. Russia was shocked to silence, and, after a few moments, kept on calling America's name, hoping for another response. And, feeling gradual relief hit him, America gradually began to react more and more to his own name, his expression even twisting slightly with annoyance.

But Russia didn't care.

America could hear him.

America only reacted to his name, but... still... It was *something.*

But then... something happened.

America's expression contorted suddenly, then went still.

The lines of America's flag that had begun to groggily form were suddenly gone from his face, and Russia felt his heart drop. In shock and unprocessed sorrow, Russia gently grabbed America by his cheek, his brows upturned, "A... America?"

No response.

Russia's expression contorted with sorrow, and he called out suddenly, "America, please!"

And then something changed. Clicked into place, maybe... and Russia saw it.

And, the tide suddenly turning, America's flag gradually began to return, until there was none of Confederate's left. Russia blinked in disbelief, unable to find any more words to say. Did this... Did this mean America won? It was... It was all over?

And, like a dream...

America opened his eyes.

Russia, much like before, rushed forward, pulling America into a quick hug. Huh... deja vu. But that didn't matter now.

America was back in his own body.

Er- Russia thinks so, at least.

But- did they... was that it? They... won? It didn't really feel all that real. None of it did.

"Hi, Ruski."

Russia let out a relieved laugh. Or was it a sob? Russia couldn't quite tell. He was so happy.

"Hi, you dumb dork."

America let out a small laugh, "Words hurt, you know."

Russia smiled, letting silence fall around them as they hugged. It was... it's so hard to explain, but... somehow that hug meant so much more than it let on. It was safety, it was relief, it was... it was impossible to explain. It marked an end of something, and the beginning of another. The beginning of something... something that Russia never thought he'd have the courage to have. Something he never thought he'd have, period.

And it was... it was nice.

It was wonderful.

And Russia couldn't stop smiling.

And, in a strange impulse, an answer in and of itself, Russia pulled away from the hug. America's confession resonating softly in his mind, his hands reached forward, grabbing onto the sides of America's head and gently caressing his cheeks. He leaned forward, and put his forehead against America's own, their lips dangerously close but not touching.

Neither moved. Neither made a sound.

The only movement was that of their hearts, and that of their breath.

Maybe Russia should've gone for the kiss, but he didn't. Instead, he simply sat there, holding America's head as America's hands awkwardly traveled to Russia's shoulders as well, unsure and cautious.

"It's over." America said softly with an equally soft yet also boundlessly unsure smile, the sound slipping into the stillness and contentedness of the moment.

And, just like that, Russia was smiling softly back, his mind revelling in the moment, the moment he thought he'd never have. This moment. This awesome, amazing moment. "Yeah," He spoke, almost breathlessly, "it's over."

And though they could've moved on, could've thought about all they lost, could've thought about the sorrow and the pain and the

ones left behind...

They instead leaned forward, revelling in that shared moment and stretching it out for eternity.

And, moving forward like it was the most natural thing in the world, their lips had connected.

Russia couldn't describe that moment even if he tried. It was... it was like everything good in the world crashed into him all at once, overwhelming him with such a sense of happiness and giddiness and contentment that he felt like a little kid again.

And, just like that, an idea- a fact- slowly and calmly dawned on them

Things would be okay.

They had each other now.

And, before Russia knew it, that moment of complete contentment- that moment of America's lips on his- was over, and they were looking at each other, smiling softly and looking at each other as if they were the only people in the entire world.

"Is that a good enough answer to your confession?" Russia spoke- softly, as to not shatter the pink haze they seemed to dwell in.

America suddenly grinned, a small laugh escaping his lips, "Yeah, yeah... it is."

They seemed to stay there for an eternity more before America's expression fell the slightest bit. Feeling himself frown at the way America's lips twitched downward, Russia asked, "America?"

America's eyes flickered up to meet Russia's, having drifted away from Russia's gaze. Giving a small, unsure frown he got up to his feet, holding out his hand for Russia to take, "Let's... let's go home, okay? We have so much to do."

Russia gave America a confused look before grabbing America's hand and letting America pull him up, "So much to do?"

America's eyes seemed to cloud with thought as he spoke, "I... I didn't see Rhode Island or Hawaii anywhere in my mind."

Russia's brows furrowed, his mind vaguely recognizing the names. America's kids... he thinks. Within seconds, his own smile had slipped away, and he squeezed America's hand, gently saying, "We can..." Russia trailed off, his mind at a loss. America had lost so much, and the happiness of their little moment was fading quickly.

"We can find them."

"And what if we don't?" America spoke, hopelessness settling in his voice.

Russia looked at America before saying determinedly, "Then... then we can find a way to move on, together. I'm not letting you face this alone anymore."

America blinked, turning and looking up at Russia. He seemed to pause for a few minutes before smiling, hesitant and unsure, his voice almost a whisper, "Together?"

Russia squeezed America's hand, his smile returning, soft and gentle.

...

"Always."

Epilogue: The End

Not every story ends happily, and every struggle has their costs.

...

Rhi and Hawaii were never found, not their bodies nor their minds, both lost to time. Forever.

America was... he was devastated, grieving for months. But... A certain someone and bucket loads of family helped him through it. And, as per America's request, a funeral of sorts was held, and they were given small headstones in a cemetery in DC. One America can always visit.

But, even so... New countryhumans- statehumans?- for Rhode Island and Hawaii were formed in America's mind. They don't remember anything that their predecessors do, but America holds out hope that, one day, they might.

But, even through all that hope, they probably never will.

But, beyond that, America has tried bit by bit to be more involved with his kids, making sure that every single one of them feels as though they are loved and can talk to him because... he'll be damned if he lets down another one of his kids again.

Speaking of... America's and Puerto Rico's relationship has improved little by little. America's not entirely sure if Puerto Rico will ever fully trust him again, but... he's working on it. Rico- and the rest of the states, too- have been given full permission to exit and re-enter the mindscape whenever they please. They just can't do it too often, or else America gets a headache.

And, a while back... America introduced Puerto Rico to a few of his Latin American relatives. He seems... much *happier* now, being around them, his biological family, even though they argue a whole lot. And although America's a little sad he can't provide Puerto Rico

that happiness... he's okay with it.

As long as Puerto Rico's happy, right?

...

And as for Russia?

Well...

A car door slammed shut, the culprit of such slamming being America. America smiled, looking ahead at ole' Russia's door. It was summer, and America was in Moscow... at Russia's door.

Yes.

Walking up to the door, America knocked on it, happiness and giddiness fluttering through his heart. After hearing some shuffling from inside the house, the door opened to a somewhat formal Russia. His hair was messy and his bow was a little wonky, but he still jokingly bowed, "You've finally arrived."

America grinned at Russia, playfully bowing back and joking, "Why, yes, your very professional pianist is here."

Russia straightened himself up, smiling down at America. "What took you so long? I've been waiting for forever! I even bought and tuned a piano and everything."

America spoke, "Oh, just a few delayed flights here and there, nothing mu- wait." America then gave Russia a weird look, "You- you bought a piano? Just for this? Are you serious?"

Russia paused before saying, "Yes, 100%."

America snorted suddenly, "Ok, well... let's see it, huh?"

Russia smiled, giving America room to step inside, "Well then, come inside." With that, he turned around, supposedly making his way to wherever the piano was, ready for his promised performance. Smiling, America then stepped inside the house after Russia, looking around in amazement before suddenly pausing, freezing up

completely.

He slowly turned around, looking at his car.

No, he wasn't looking at his car.

He was looking at *you.*

Us.

His eyes were unusually wide, his previously smiling face frozen into startling blankness. No, that isn't the correct word for it. Though his expression could be described as blank, it wasn't really. No, it was expectant. Crazily giddy, maybe. He stared at you- *us*- for a few moments, ublinking, before the edges of his lips curled upwards, the beginnings of a smile on his face.

But... it was odd, in a sense. It was a smile but... it wasn't *right*. It wasn't how a smile should be.

It was... *crazy*, if that's the right word for it.

A smile only a madman would have.

And, to the stillness of the empty road... no, to *us*, he spoke one word. Two words, whispered and lost amongst the wind.

"The end."

And with that, he turned back around, the door closing shut behind him.

And, after a few minutes, the sounds of fingers dancing on the keys of the piano started to play, heard through the walls of Russia's home and echoing into that empty street, the song old and familiar and calm, the notes drifting into the wind and getting lost to time, echoing further and further away.

I could tell you about each note, how they spoke a message of calm that protruded out onto that lonely street...

But I could also tell you how the fingers that played them were off,

unnatural, jerky... each note calm but forced. Maybe if you listened close enough and had a good enough ear, you could hear it, the offness of the notes and the hands that played them.

Maybe then you'd finally start to realize...

That "America" wasn't really there...

At all.

Afterword

Hello, my dear readers!

You've made it, you've reached the very end.

I'm going to say a few simple things in this afterword, a bit of an explanation... and an apology. In essence, this book was pretty poorly planned, I'll admit. It was a love letter of sorts to all the first stories I read, inspired by them and everything. But... near the end, my motivation for this story took a nosedive, and I'll be honest with the fact I don't exactly like this story too much anymore.

Even so, I only had a few more chapters to go, so... I've been pushing myself to work on it and finish it.

Well, here we are! I finished it- my first finished story. I suppose this is a lesson of sorts- plan better, and for pete's sake don't stretch it out as long as this. This is around 45 chapters- 45 chapters!- with most being over 2,500 words! That's insane, and I'm surprised I was even able to finish this.

But, nevertheless, I'd like to thank all of you for coming along and riding along on this rollercoaster ride. It's been a crazy journey and, for what it's worth, I hope you enjoyed it. To everyone who commented, voted, and even just read this silly little book... thank you. Thank you so much.

And, I really hope to see all of you in my next book. (and *cough* *cough* my other book, An Irregular Heartbeat, that too. Totally *not* advertising here)

<3 Selva